

Chapter Three

With the approach of autumn, the summer holidays came to an end. Hamid went away to school with his brothers and as the days passed by he settled down to his studies which began to occupy his mind. His memories of the village and the people in it faded except when he met travellers from his neighbourhood and was stirred to ask about events. Did Zainab still remember him or did she, like so many others, let the past lie fallow until the future dispersed it? Did she feel anything of the meaning of separation or did the present keep her from thinking about past times?

In fact they were both of a similar disposition. Oblivion spread its cloak as they both became preoccupied with the world around them. But when Hamid was alone and had the opportunity to reflect on the countryside and its beauty, the fields appeared before him as though he were present among them. He would picture the gentle streams traversing the open country, bordered by trees in their radiant attire and the water wheels turning here and there, emitting their sad and plaintive sounds. Sometimes he visualised the clear blue sky, split by the light of the brilliant sun. And when it set, stars twinkled in the heavens while the gentle breezes carried the happiest of dreams to the resting world. Sometimes too, he remembered Zainab and those whom he associated with her.

Zainab moved from one day to another in her usual manner, each much the same as the day before and as time flowed gently by, adding to the great age of the world, each brought with it the dreams she needed to resign herself to the next. Waiting patiently for her hopes to be realised she looked expectantly to the future but as it came it passed, adding another chapter to the history of time.

Autumn drew to a close and no crops remained safe in the fields of grass and clover stretching as far as the eye could see. Empty of people and workers the land was now a pasture for

the animals that had laboured during the season—and how glad they were of the rest which nature granted them! They looked as if they were on holiday, raising their heads from time to time, bending the silent ear of nature with their noises. Then the birds of the air would answer; turtledoves and sandgrouse pouring forth their winter warblings, singing out in gentle melodies and filling the air with music to dispel all fear and return the world to a state of tranquillity.

In the corner of a field stood a shelter of dry straw, white now white after the wind and rain had washed it clean of dust and through the narrow opening which served as a door, black motionless shapes huddled within. A fire was alight in the hearth around which the fallaheen, their brown faces just visible beneath their cloaks, sat talking together, glad of the warmth of the shelter and the protection it offered against the strong winds which prevail at this time of year. Occasionally one of the younger ones would go out to see to the cattle grazing in the pastures and apart from the occasional passer-by, the roads were deserted.

Just before sunset on one of those December days when the cold chaps the face and teeth chatter, two boys were returning to the village discussing what they intended to do that evening:

‘Let’s go to the fakka* at Ammi Said’s house,’ said one. ‘We can watch Mustafa and Ummu Saad’s daughter dancing.’

‘That reminds me,’ replied the other. ‘It must be nearly time for their wedding. The contract has been written for almost two years now, although no one seems to know when the wedding will take place.’

‘I’ve heard it will be about two weeks after Eid,* which is in three days. So within twenty days they should be married!’

The gathering had become something of a regular event and when Hamid came to spend Eid with his family he heard about the music and dancing and wanted to witness it. He found a companion to accompany him and they set off

* Village gathering with music and dancing.

* The end of Ramadan, the month of fasting.

together, laughing in anticipation of what the evening might hold in store. Making their way through the alley-ways of the village they passed the mosque which stood as a silent and dignified reminder of death and the life to come. At times of prayer, voices resound in veneration and glorification as the devout remember what lies beyond this world in which men seek their pleasures and follow their reckless ways.

The two friends however, were unaffected, laughing in their youth without a thought for that fearsome day which lay waiting for them as it lies waiting for us all. Their only concern was to enter the hustle and bustle of Ammi Said's house where the shrill laughter of the village boys betrayed their empty-headedness and simplistic minds.

Crossing the threshold with his companion, Hamid saw before him a large gathering consisting almost entirely of boys. Those girls who were present kept to the edge of the ragged group, some of whom conversed eagerly while others sat quietly or nodded sleepily. The only sad aspect to the merry atmosphere of this dancing-house, as day by day they anticipated the approaching festival, was the dismal lamp which cast a feeble glow over everything. The faces that appeared in the reddish light were rugged from the harshness of the sun and the cold of winter, but although devoid of softness they still retained their smiles. Drowning out the voices of those who were talking was the sound of a darrabuka,* drummed by experienced hands while the eyes of the attentive audience focused on the dancers in the middle of the ring.

When Hamid saw the workers he remembered the days of summer and on recognising a group of boys and girls whom he had known at that time he strolled across to ask how the work was going. They replied that things were no different from before and no sooner had he left them than they turned back to their friends and forgot all about Hamid and his questions. They wanted only to give themselves up to the pleasures of the moment—an opportunity not to be missed. There being no compensation for a lost hour of pleasure!

*A conical one-headed hand drum.

Scanning the faces, Hamid noticed Zainab's sister standing against the wall, in conversation with one of her neighbours. He went over to greet her and ask about her sister but she did not know if Zainab was up on the roof, where she usually sat every night, or whether she had gone home. In the hope of seeing her, Hamid made his way through the closely packed group, with hardly an inch of space between them, and climbing the stairs he found Zainab by the bannister, alone beneath the pitch-black cover of night. He stood beside her and with a gentle movement attracted her attention. Perturbed at the loneliness she had evidently brought on herself by leaving the noise and laughter of the house to sit alone at the mercy of this winter night, it was no surprise when she turned her head and he perceived her fixed eyes and obvious distraction. After a moment's silence he said:

'How are you, Zainab?'

But Zainab was too distanced from her surroundings to reply and shifting her gaze to him, she responded with an expression of such tenderness that Hamid was deeply touched. Were it not for the utter blackness of the night, near the end of the month, existence itself would have melted before such a look but the darkness could not share the sentiments that flooded Hamid's soul in front of that pained expression.

'How are you, Zainab?'

He repeated his question and feeling compassion he held her hands in his and gave her a brotherly kiss on the side of her forehead, aware that she was undergoing some kind of distress from which there was no one to console her. Her expression revealed that she accepted his sympathy with modesty and gratitude and when he saw her like that his feelings grew stronger. He drew her towards him and began to caress her whereupon she lost herself completely, unaware of the past or the present, and giving in to his gentle advances she allowed herself to lean against him. But no sooner did she remember that her heart was not her own to give than she began to tremble and her wide eyes clouded with tears which told of the sadness she was suffering and also the appreciation she felt for Hamid.

Time passes by while our hearts remain the property of some other force, its power so great that we may wish to devote our lives to it, but at the same time the knowledge that we cannot dispose of our hearts as we please saddens us. This spell on earth, with its happiness and suffering, joy and despair, is beyond our control. Our destinies lie in the hand of that other force and when we feel its presence we shudder, knowing that we are incapable of doing anything we want to do by ourselves.

The darkness shrouding the world was pierced only by the dim lamps which cast golden rays in narrow circles that looked like wounds in the body of the night or primitive weapons, unchanged through the centuries, to which the villagers turn whenever the sky forsakes them. The power of the night encompassed the whole of creation so that all creatures submitted to its authority and stood equal before it. That which was visible appeared obscure, edged with sorrow, and the two silent figures in the night were overcome with perplexity; one wanting to know what was troubling his companion and the other, the beautiful one, suffering an invisible torment which left her powerless and confused. In this situation Hamid eventually broke their long silence with a question about what had been happening during his absence and with a sigh of contentment at merely knowing there was someone in the world who cared for her, Zainab replied that she was happy and that nothing had changed. Then they reverted to their former quietude, turning their gaze in the direction of the dancers and merrymakers.

They sat together until the friend who had accompanied Hamid called up to him and bidding Zainab farewell he made his way down the staircase, his soul filled with peace. But in the midst of the noise of handclapping and the crazy merriment of the fakka, his heart shuddered as the sacred feeling that had filled his being while he sat with Zainab disappeared, shattered by the boisterous activity around him. Returning along the road, however, he soon began to laugh with his companion as they walked past the mosque which still stood in the darkness, warning of death and the life to come.

In the village, Aziza's brother had arrived on the last train to spend the days of Eid in the country and when Hamid learned of his presence he hastened to him and made his greetings. They stayed up for a long time talking or playing cards and backgammon before going outside to listen to some verses of the Qur'an recited elegantly by the faqih.* Then they returned to their homes to take an hour's rest before dawn.

Alone on his bed, Hamid reflected on what he had seen during the evening: the communal happiness in which the village boys revelled, the girls on the edge of the ring and Zainab, hardly speaking a word. Recalling his conversation with Aziza's brother, he also began to think about Aziza and in this way he imagined a confusion of many things, which mostly slipped from his mind as quickly as they came. However, the significance of such recollections is that important events take a more definite shape in the memory, overshadowing matters of no consequence so that while the images of the dancers and merrymakers only appeared briefly before passing into oblivion, the image of Zainab sitting silently by the bannister like a bronze statue, remained. Hamid had been moved by her sadness and wondered what could have happened to her but in the end he shrugged his shoulders, saying to himself: 'Well, what has it got to do with me?' As for Zainab, she was still thinking about Hamid's gentleness when the gathering came to an end and her sister called her to come down. But she trembled at her feelings for him—maybe there really is some divine element in the soul which perceives what the senses do not and that is what guides our hopes and affections, tracing out for us the path of our lives.

Although Hamid tried to forget, the image of Zainab looking to him for compassion filled him with sympathy and he wanted to know the reason behind her grief. He had always known her to be contented and happy so what could have happened, in front of all that boisterous merrymaking, to make her feel that she alone should bear the misery of the world? Maybe something had befallen her family which had

* Qur'an reciter.

saddened her, but what could possibly have befallen a family who had always been poor and would always remain so? Maybe someone had wronged her, causing her to be withdrawn this evening, but then who?

Hamid remained with his thoughts until it was time for sahur* which he ate downstairs before returning to his room to continue his dreams. This time however, the images assailed him so strongly that he could not face them and in dismay he tried to retreat. Whenever he imagined himself with Aziza's brother he felt so agitated that it was only sleep that finally brought him rest from his anxiety.

Later in the morning, Hamid was still preoccupied and decided to go to the fields in the hope of finding something there to divert him. The farmlands spread out before his eyes, covered with green clover and the new shoots of cereal crops, tender but full of life so that when the wind passed over they bowed before it as one body. The silky surface formed into waves that rippled into the distance until becoming lost from sight on the horizon. After walking a short distance he saw smoke rising from the vicinity of one of the shelters and made towards it, believing that a group of workers had lit a fire for protection against the cold or to comfort themselves during this, the last day of Ramadan.

Upon reaching them however, he found one of his uncles looking on while the others roasted corncobs over the embers. Hamid was shocked by what he saw but they were all laughing merrily as they placed the cobs carefully and precisely on the fire. Apparently they considered that this last day of Ramadan, the feast of young people as it is called, was exempt from any obligation to fast. As for Hamid's uncle, he took a fresh, ripe cob of corn and offered it to him smiling. Hamid knew that he should not just sit there and witness their arrogant behaviour but all he could do was look at them with contempt. If only they had concealed their shameful conduct, but they were doing it openly with no regard for anyone else's feelings and even Hamid's own uncle dared to offer him a corncob

* Last meal before daybreak during the month of Ramadan.

when he knew that he was fasting. It was as though by his action he wanted to show just how little he cared for the obligation to which his family had been committed for so many generations.

Hamid left them, making his way through the fields until he arrived at the bank of a stream which was dry and empty, waiting to be dredged. He stared for a while then looking up he saw the clouds disperse, allowing the sun to cast its rays upon the earth and transform the dull appearance of the landscape. When it disappeared again, the world reverted to that state of resigned sadness in which it had been since the morning and as this scene repeated itself, Hamid was able to find some diversion from his own concerns.

Retracing his steps to the house at the end of the day, some of his relatives were playing backgammon with Aziza's brother and he sat watching them until he became weary and went to his room. On the way he passed his sister who stopped to hand him some cards, which turned out to be greetings from some of his friends. When he had read them he noticed that she was looking very pleased with herself and as she was still holding some cards he asked if she had received any greetings herself. He knew how much she liked to correspond with him when he was away, and with her friends when she found the time to do so, and because she often shared her correspondence with her brother, Hamid sensed that she wanted to show him what was in her hand. On opening the three cards which she gave him to read, one was from Aziza, the others from two of her school friends and as he held Aziza's card, looking at the message she had written inside it he began to tremble, which his sister might have noticed had she been more observant. It occurred to him to keep the card for himself but his sister took it from him and held onto it tightly, determined not to lose any one of her greeting cards so Hamid was obliged, reluctantly, to let her keep it.

When he was alone in his room, Hamid's desire for Aziza reawakened and he wished with all his heart that she had come with her brother to spend the days of Eid in the village. But she had not come, preferring instead to stay with her

family in the town even though she knew how strongly he felt for her! Such hopes and desires, which fill the heads of growing young men, occupied him for a long time until he passed into delightful dreams in which he imagined everything he wished for, planning a life of love with Aziza always by his side. He was only brought back to reality by a considerable commotion in the courtyard and looking towards the West, he saw the sun sinking to its rest as though it sympathised with the hungry world and wished to gladden it by bringing to a close this last hour of Ramadan. A moment later someone knocked on his door calling him to join them.

All his family were gathered together, one staring at the horizon in order to determine with his own eyes when the day had come to an end while another looked anxiously at his watch and a third stood with eyes closed, waiting for the last remaining minutes of the fast to pass. A fourth gazed at the rooftops as though there were something new there despite having seen them so many times while the younger ones could hardly keep their eyes off the table, laden as it was with plates of delicious food and sweetmeats which made their mouths water.

No sooner had Hamid taken his place among them than the voice of the muezzin rose above the silence of the village, proclaiming the return of freedom, and when they heard it they sighed in contentment and expressions of happiness appeared on their faces.

* * *

The following day was the Bayram, the end of Ramadan holiday, when people visit one another and exchange the traditional greetings, replacing the silent resignation of the world with activity and merriment. There were smiles on the lips of all the villagers as they passed to and fro along the roads, shaking hands with everyone they met, wishing each other a happy new year and good health and entering the houses of acquaintances and relatives to share with them the gaiety of the occasion. From time to time groups of girls and women emerged from the alleyways bearing gifts of food on their heads. They wore their red

gallabiyas,* some with a black shawl round their shoulders and as they walked peacefully one after another or side by side, they talked together in tones which expressed their contentment. On meeting friends they would stop to exchange greetings but were too reserved to let the air ring out with their laughter on that happy day lest it should be said of them that they were wanton.

Hamid got up early and after praying the Eid prayer he went to receive those who had come to greet him, some of whom wished him a long life while the older ones laughed and wished him a bride in his bosom by the next Bayram. Then with a group of companions he joined the villagers in their Eid celebrations, walking the streets from end to end, stopping here and there to drink coffee before moving on and whenever he saw a group of girls, Hamid did not neglect to wish them a happy new year. Sometimes he called out to those he knew by name but they would lower their eyes, and covering their faces with their elegant headscarves, return his greetings briefly before continuing on their way in an orderly fashion. When Zainab passed by in one of these groups Hamid looked at her but said nothing although her presence among the other girls, who were all from the same family, attracted his attention and that of some of his friends who called out:

‘There’ll be a husband for you this year, Zainab. Inshallah.*’

This did nothing to alter her earnest expression and she walked on with her young companions, looking straight ahead, her dark eyes shining beneath the arches of her eyebrows. Hamid, who knew nothing of her situation and wanted to find out asked one of his friends:

‘Is Zainab to be married then?’

To which his companion replied:

‘They say Ammi Khalil wants to engage her to his son Hassan, and if you want my opinion I think she’s very lucky.’

Their conversation was interrupted by another invitation to drink coffee and they all sat together on a low stone bench

* Loose ankle-length garments.

* Customary Muslim expression meaning ‘God willing’.

covered with a mat, while the sun's rays shone on their faces making them look even more radiant and joyful. The sunlight fell on the old white clothes of the fallaheen which they kept to wear on these special occasions and for a few hours they escaped the continuous hardship of their existence. Having enjoyed their company for a while Hamid and his friends got up to complete their tour in order to be home by noon so that they could rest a little before the afternoon prayer, after which the visits would begin again.

Hamid was happy on that festive day, glad to be free after the restrictions of the fast had been lifted and to return to his normal routine, sleeping at night and active by day. Happy also in believing that Zainab was soon to find a good match, something rare for girls of her station. As long as they did not wish for anything more than comparative comfort, what was in store for Zainab would be more than she could hope for. Hamid seemed to forget that as long as there are desires and longings in the human soul and that selfish emotion called love exists between men and women, it is not unlikely that we may find ourselves miserable, even in the lap of luxury.

PART TWO

The harvested land, like a great cleft, seemed astonished in its nakedness, having so recently been the habitat of such luscious plants.

Chapter One

In the great capital at the beginning of winter . . . The day was awaiting the sun to dispel the dusky darkness and bring warmth to the people who shivered as they jostled one another in the streets on their way to work. The city was awakening from a long cold night which many inhabitants had passed in silence with neither lamp nor star to comfort them. The only sounds they heard were the voices of the watchmen in the alleys, calling out to one another from time to time and bringing some degree of security into the black of night.

In that hour, as the world was coming back to life, Hamid awoke completely relaxed from a peaceful, dreamless sleep. He dressed slowly then went to his studies to which he applied himself diligently and in return he derived a certain amount of pleasure from his work so that by day he did not need to concern himself with anything else. In the evenings he would sit up with his brothers and friends discussing a variety of unrelated topics one after another. They conversed without constraint, laughing contentedly as they talked or listened, happy with themselves and the lives they led. When Hamid was alone in bed, images filled his head and the faces of people he had known in the past appeared before him in the darkness. In some he saw kindness and beauty; others were serious and dignified. Then he would pass from this great assembly into a wholesome sleep in which he spent his nights. Occasionally, among the many thoughts that came to him, the idea of marriage cropped up. Although he was still young enough to regard it as a distant prospect, there was no other context in which to express his longing or conjure up the fantasies of love and happiness which are so much a part of being young. So when the image of his beloved came to him in the darkness he would imagine he was embracing her and proceed in a way he could never

have allowed himself, had he not considered that one day she would be his future bride.

But the days were filled with serious work and Hamid's notion that marriage was something for the future gradually quietened his dreams. The world which he had previously imagined to be scented with flowers and saturated with love became a calm and peaceful place in which he found his greatest pleasure in work and thought. The people, places and events that occupied him now became the focus of his attention and as he absorbed himself in his academic pursuits so they dominated his mind and heart. Among the books he read were some concerning women and marriage which opened his mind to concepts quite different from his original beliefs and he began to see married life as something dull and monotonous, with no appeal, convinced it was only man's inherent foolishness that had led him to believe there was any joy or happiness to be found there. Searching his mind for a couple he might know who had found in the official bond of marriage the happiness they had hitherto hoped for, his discoveries only strengthened his conviction and he came to regard that bond as just another of those chains of custom to which man becomes attached simply because others have done so before him. When one's forefathers and contemporaries, rich and poor alike, scholars or fools have adopted this custom and given it the sanctity of history, man in his stupidity considers it one of life's blessings.

Consequently Hamid's memories of Aziza declined day by day and although she sometimes appeared in his dreams, the idea of being beside her did not arouse his emotions or reawaken his former desire. Instead he found a great emptiness in which to lose himself so that even when he was beset by confusion or anxiety, he contented himself with oblivion, or nothingness. When he thought of Zainab however, he remembered the pleasant hours they had spent together in the midst of the glorious countryside, surrounded by trees and streams and the birds delighting them with their loving melodies, full of romance and passion.

These hours, in Hamid's view, had brought them close to

each other and the memory of them still held some significance for him.

Returning home from his studies one day, Hamid took off his outdoor clothes and put on the white gallabiya and skullcap which he wore in the house. As he sat thinking, and drinking the coffee his servant brought him, a group of his school friends called to visit him. Laughing amongst themselves, they entered the room and greeted him in one breath:

'As-salam alaikum.'

'And peace be with you,' replied Hamid. 'Are you all well? What are you up to?' Then calling to his servant: 'Make some more coffee, boy!'

One of his friends answered:

'The four of us met by chance and thought it would be fun to visit you. You've become quite a philosopher of late, always preferring to be by yourself. What's it all about? Listen, if you didn't already know, Asad Effendi is getting married tomorrow and we've come to ask you to go to the wedding with us.'

'Getting married? Why? The poor wretch!'

'Yes and you're not going to philosophise about that too are you? I should say he's a very lucky man!'

The servant entered with the coffee tray and five cups, one for each of them. Ali Effendi took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it, then offered one to Sheikh Khalil. But no sooner did Ali Effendi stretch out his hand towards him with the cigarette box than Hassanin snatched it from him saying:

'God forbid! You "sheikhs" are greedy enough. How could you think of smoking? Go and take your snuff instead!'

These words stirred Sheikh Khalil who began to defend his habit with all his might, breaking into a flow of eloquence and leaving no simile unturned to which he might liken his black powder. Indeed he made use of every possible allusion, metaphor and figure of speech he could think of. Then to demonstrate the truth of what he was saying he put his hand in his pocket and brought out a small tin, tapping three times with his forefinger on the lid. He opened it slowly and taking a pinch between his fingers, he inclined his head slightly as

he closed one nostril with the tip of his finger and sniffed with the other. The snuff flew violently up his nose! Then after giving the other nostril its fill he returned the tin to its hiding place and took out a blue handkerchief which he held between his hands ready to use when the need arose.

Hamid, who had been staring silently at the floor, turned his gaze back to the group when the commotion had died down, only to repeat the thought that occupied his mind:

'So Asad Effendi is getting married tomorrow . . . Poor wretch! . . .'

But Sheikh Ali interrupted him saying:

'The prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, said: "Marry and multiply and I shall take pride in you, among other nations on the day of resurrection".' And Ali Effendi, after clearing his throat, countered:

'Why do think him so unfortunate?'

As though something had been unleashed inside him, Hamid replied:

'A man looks for happiness in marriage because he finds his own lonely life so unbearable that he wishes to exchange it for another. He thinks the new life will be better for him but when the first few days of delusion have passed and the reality of what he has done becomes clear, he belatedly regrets. I have searched in vain to find someone I know who has achieved the happiness he dreamed of in marriage but all the partnership seems to do is bring people down from their imagined happiness to inevitable misery. When you see the offspring suffering all manner of affliction from the day of their birth, don't you feel sorry for them and regret the fact that they were born? And later on in life we are no less wretched. Our fathers and our old people tell us that our years are the best and that youth is the springtime of life. Well, if I'm in the spring of life, with all the bitterness that I've experienced, then by God, how wretched shall I become in the future? If even the young sometimes wish to do away with themselves, won't the days and nights of old age be filled with this desire? Or do they tell us this simply to appear brave in our eyes, and worthy of our admiration?'

The tone of Hamid's voice was full of woe, whereupon Hassanin took up the conversation:

'It seems to me my friend that we spoil the enjoyment of life for ourselves and ruin our chances of happiness on earth. Personally, I think we could live happily from the first days of our life to the last if we lived among people with real feelings, following different customs to those of our own society. Our people renounce the world and ignore it, looking at the things around them with cold hearts which stubbornly refuse to love anything beautiful. They regard life from a distance, fearing everything and shrinking from situations which might disclose their feelings, while all the time their souls become eaten away with despair, and misery is engrained upon their faces. Yet they consider any alternative a digression into the realm of sin and temptation.

'Maybe I would agree that our system of marriage does not produce the bliss we dream of but it is up to each of us to strive for something else if we are sure that we are right. After all, if people only follow the customs of the past how will the world advance? Nevertheless, I don't entirely agree with your opinion. I believe that marriage supplies a framework for happiness and that it is the best system we could devise to maintain our species in the greatest security and wellbeing we could hope for.

'Imagine the situation which you envisage. Helpless children who do not know their fathers, and women with no one to support them in their times of weakness, in the midst of this urban life with all its pressures and demands. Consider the exhausted man returning from his job, looking for comfort in the words of a loved one but finding only others like himself while our women work to earn their livelihoods in order to look after themselves and their children. Surely you would agree that there is no happiness for a man without a woman who loves him at his side, and no happiness for a woman without a devoted man to care for her.

'Humanity is not sufficiently developed to allow the changes which you demand. Our situation today is the result of centuries, of millions of years. You can never deny the past with

all its rights and wrongs, even if you don't acknowledge it. All we can do is work to change some of our customs and introduce into the relationships between men and women those healthy elements which are lacking. That's the right thing to do and change is possible. How much happiness there could be within the family if only people understood what "family" really means. How contented they would be, in ways they cannot now conceive. Although the true meaning is lost to us at present you should not regard the concept of "family" as just another manifestation of conflict and hopelessness. Our lives may be plagued by bitterness and disappointment but that is due to our incorrect upbringing. Do you think that a boy who takes on such a load when he is only sixteen years of age will be anything but an old man in his twenties? Then, after childbirth, women experience nothing of the world except from within the walls of their houses, so that marriage becomes literally what is quoted from the traditions of the prophet: "Marry and multiply . . ."

'Let young people love without being chained by customs to which too much importance is attached. The long future awaits with burdens which they can never imagine in the days of their youth.'

Ali Effendi joined in the discussion:

'Asad Effendi will marry tomorrow as thousands have married before him, just as you yourself will one day marry. Picture in any way you wish the wife that you want. Make her an ideal of perfection and beauty and create for yourself a wonderful kingdom which you think will be yours. Yet after marriage she will be just another woman and you will be neither happy nor sad but the same as everybody else. If you could clip the wings of your youthful ideals and live more in the world of reality, you would see the truth of what I say.'

'Some time ago, when I was studying in France, I knew a girl who was a waitress in a restaurant. On my return after a few months away she was no longer there and when I enquired I was told that she had married a boy who was a waiter in a cafe. And what was the reason for this marriage? They put their savings together and opened a shop which they worked

independently for more profit. Similarly, in our country, working people get married every day not to live happily together but to make the most of their possessions. Of course a man likes a woman to care for him and share his problems just as a woman wants to be looked after in her times of weakness, and in this way each helps to make the other's share of problems lighter. But it would be a mistake to believe that people from other classes achieve more from marriage than this. If chance decrees that a husband and wife should find themselves in love they may enjoy some happiness, but this is the exception and rarely does it last!

Night had begun to take the place of day and darkness gradually filled the room where they sat. Outside, the minarets were shrouded in mist as the muezzins climbed up inside them and a few moments later they raised their voices to break the still silence of the air with their calls to prayer. Hamid raised his eyebrows and in a sad but placid tone he murmured:

'Are dreams of love, I wonder, any easier to realise than dreams of happiness in marriage?'

Their conversation over, Hamid bade farewell to his friends at the door and returned, his heart heavy with cares. He sat down and stared at the pictures in his room of pyramids and other ancient monuments which, although succeeded by so many generations, still appear novel in the eye of the beholder. Then his thoughts drifted far away and resting his head in his hands he became oblivious to everything until he was called to eat.

When it was time for bed he stretched himself out and closed his eyes, his mind racing to the limits of his imagination. But on finding it impossible to get to sleep he opened them again and gazed into the darkness all around. Eventually he got up to pull back the curtains and looked out into the blackness of a starless sky. It was completely dark and the cold panes of glass revealed nothing of what lay beyond. Pressing his burning forehead against the window he stood there lost in thought, recalling the days of the past.

Out of the stillness a wind blew up and rain began to fall,

swept against the windowpanes so that he could hear its rhythmic thud on the glass. Sometimes it fell gently, its sound no more than a whisper then driven by the storm, the continuous pattering increased in volume—and all the while the darkness remained complete.

Listening to the commotion outside, his dreams were interrupted for a moment, but memories of the happy hours he had spent by the side of Zainab and the times he had revelled in his fantasies about Aziza soon flooded back. The rainfall played on the young man's ears as Hamid stayed up, alone with his thoughts, while in the neighbouring rooms everybody else was comfortably asleep. When the sky had discharged its load he discerned a glimpse of light, breaking through the clouds which gradually dispersed to reveal a waning moon and beneath its pallid rays the nearby walls became visible and roofs gleamed with rainwater. Calm was restored and there was no sound to be heard, so feeling somewhat disconsolate Hamid went back to bed where he spent the rest of the night amid boundless dreams.

The next morning his mind had cleared. He attended his studies, returning home at the usual time and in this manner the days passed by. As winter drew to a close, the hours of daylight began to claim back what they had lost to the night and the pleasant weather encouraged the inhabitants of the city so that smiling faces could be seen in the streets and activity was resumed in every place. The world advanced towards the spring, leaving behind the frowning aspect of winter and as the sap rose in the great trees, planted along some of the streets of the capital, they prepared to don their fresh green robes.

Sometimes Hamid was assailed by memories, at other times he forgot the past completely. When he heard news of Zainab's marriage he prayed that she might find prosperity and contentment. He hoped too that she would find some happiness to comfort her through the years of her life—that monotonous life which ends as it begins, while death creeps up stealthily all the time. As the last vestiges of youth disappear, we leave behind those days of beauty and love and an eager desire to

experience the world. Moving on from that phase of infatuation we enter a state of sombre serenity or what may be called serious understanding. Then something akin to sadness mingles in the depths of our being as we resign ourselves to our fate. Looking on in bewilderment, time flies before us and we arrange our affairs so that its passing might be easier until life is nothing more than a waiting room which we finally depart on the wings of a bird that carries us to our ultimate destination.

Hamid remembered Zainab and her glances and wished her health and happiness. Then came the spring. The world laughed, the days lengthened, the trees were adorned and the sun grew stronger after its winter languor. An atmosphere of expectation prevailed, bringing joy to all creatures after the period of inertia. The flowers diffused their scents, wafting sweetness into the air and imbuing the hearts of men with pure fragrances which intoxicate the soul. Caressed by such a breeze we can only feel love for everything growing on the face of the earth or moving in the air. Hamid began to frequent the outskirts of the city where nature, rearranged by the hand of man, had a pleasant, comely appearance as opposed to the wild beauty of virgin lands. Green fields and gardens with blossoming trees stretched out by the side of the great river where waves rolled gently past, following each other along with the currents from places far away until they become part of the sea.

On one occasion Hamid met a friend and they strolled along together discussing the landscape that had been planned out by the tyrants during the days of despotism, to be enjoyed today by the descendants of the oppressed. Finding pleasure in their conversation they forgot about the time until the sun began to sink in the West. The windows in the houses on the opposite bank lit up and a beautiful roseate hue covered the river as the glow of evening appeared on the horizon. The golden disc of the sun descended quickly to its rest and reflections of street lamps danced gaily on the surface of the water. It was the hour when nature brings forth the night. After the first forewarnings of darkness the great abyss descends, shapes

become obscure and the evening breezes flow to the hearts of men, invigorating their minds and souls. Happiness and joy were in the air and smiles of tranquillity and contentment were painted on the lips of the two companions.

Turning on their heels they returned the way they had come, as happy as they could wish themselves to be. And while they walked, Hamid reflected that the beauty of nature outshone all other beauty even though the spring stirred his desire to be united with a loved one who would be consumed in him in the same way that he wished to be consumed in her.

PART THREE

From behind the battling clouds the sun broke through to send its rays over the earth, casting its light over the fields and roads which basked in an ocean of life and beauty.

Chapter Five

Apart from attending to her household affairs, Zainab's mother now spent most of her time by her daughter's side. She kept her husband informed and sometimes he went himself to see how she was, but Zainab could not look at him without an expression of pained reproach that struck his heart and which he almost understood. Ummu Jaziyya devoted herself to looking after Zainab, leaving her only at the obligatory times of prayer when she would go to pray in her room. At night Hassan stayed with his wife and she had no need of anyone else.

A cloud of sadness hung over the house and the faces of all who came or went showed signs of grief. Even the dust-coloured sun which sent a pool of rays round the bed where Zainab lay, seemed sad as if it were aware of the anxious hearts that its light embraced. The leaves of the acacia trees in front of the house had blackened and when the wind blew through the branches they swayed dolefully, shaking their heads in sorrow.

Sometimes Zainab was visited by her friends, full of the freshness of youth, but on seeing them she remembered her own days of freedom—and how bitter to be reminded of our former strength and beauty in the days of our decline and weakness! When they departed, they left behind a broken-hearted girl whose tears of anguish flowed from her wide eyes and trickled down her pale cheeks.

Every day the cough made her weaker until she was so thin that in bed there was virtually no trace of her except for her face.

Perceiving nothing but misery all around him, Hassan finally despaired and went to tell the magistrate about his wife's condition. The magistrate criticised him for leaving her so long without being seen by a doctor but the fault for this lay with Hassan's parents who had always replied whenever he

suggested treatment: 'God is our doctor. Our Lord cures . . . ' So Hassan's mother had continued to burn incense and alum, convincing herself and everyone else that Zainab was merely suffering some evil visitation which would soon pass away if God so wished.

But God did not wish and Zainab had continued to grow weaker until Hassan was obliged to resort to the village magistrate to complain of his parent's obstinacy. The magistrate did not hesitate. He ordered the telephone clerk to request the provincial doctor to come at once and Hassan promised to provide everything that was required when he arrived.

The doctor came on the first available train, reaching the village as the sun entered its last quarter. The magistrate greeted him warmly and called for a servant to make coffee while they exchanged pleasantries. The doctor was a good-humoured man and his youthfulness endeared him to the people of the district who always welcomed him cheerfully with open smiles on their faces. When the formal greetings were completed and the two men had drunk their coffee they began to talk for a long time about politics. They upheld the opinion of the party they belonged to and supported the newspaper to which they both subscribed, believing their representatives to be almost infallible. In praising their leaders, they enhanced their conversation with appropriate expressions of acclaim and admiration as they recalled the most recent articles written by their political heroes. At the same time they scorned the politicians of the other parties, considering them all to be totally misguided, if not actually insane:

'They would never have permitted the publication of that article two days ago. They're clever at talking but actually do nothing!'

'They argue every word, kick up a fuss over every little thing, repeating "long live" and "down with" until they give themselves and everybody else a headache. Meanwhile the English and the Khedive remain in their positions of power.'

In this manner they discussed the leaders of the parties, the ministers of government and the government officials, especially those of their district. Then the doctor told a story about

the chief of police who constantly flattered the Governor of the province and who was invariably hypocritical. This so pleased the magistrate that he stood up to embrace his companion—the least reward he could bestow on him for ridiculing the libertine who forced the magistrates at his meetings to make contributions to meaningless causes, buy books that they did not need and subscribe to newspapers which they despised. Although they had to be content with the decisions of the chief of police and accept what he said, at least in defaming him they found some relief from their burdens! So the two friends indulged themselves freely, each exchanging one story for another until they had had their fill. When the doctor asked why he had been called out, because he was in a hurry and wanted to board the eight o'clock train, the magistrate finally ordered one of the guards to summon Hassan Abu Khalil.

The sun descended in the sky and as if unable to control its movement, sank quickly towards its resting place. The wind shook the branches of the trees and palms, rustling the leaves, and on the surface of the pond the waves grew bigger as they approached the bank, then disappeared. As far as the eye could see the roads were virtually deserted except for the main road where the women passed to and fro, carrying their earthenware jars on their heads. They walked slowly and deliberately, their bodies swaying from side to side with every step and in the hazy distance they appeared like angels of the vast spaces over which they strode. The silence which reigned over the countryside encompassed the village where all was quiet and calm.

Hassan came quickly. After waiting anxiously for hours he was at his wits end. He hung his head gloomily and the signs of sadness upon him touched the hearts of the magistrate and the doctor. The magistrate asked him to sit down and tell the doctor what was the matter—but what was there to tell? That Zainab was sick, her condition pitiful and the very sight of her made his eyes stream and his heart weep? That every day she grew weaker than the day before and the girl he had once known to be healthy, strong and beautiful was wasting away? Was it in the power of the young doctor who

sat twiddling his fingers and looking at Hassan sympathetically, to relieve her affliction and restore their peace of mind so that they might enjoy life once more and find some meaning to existence?

When the doctor and Hassan reached the patient's bedside everyone left except for Zainab's mother. The doctor's first question was whether any member of her family had been taken ill in the past but her mother was there before him strong and healthy, and her father was no less active. So he enquired whether there was anything she wanted, to which she said 'no', then he asked about a number of routine matters, none of which received a convincing reply. Finally he requested to be left alone with her whereupon he proceeded to banter like a mother coaxing a child, hoping to find out anything she might reveal. But he was far from satisfied with the answers he received and maybe he was asking for more than she could give. Whatever faith we may have in a doctor and his science, we can never easily divulge something for which we think we will be blamed, however confident we may be that our trust will not be betrayed.

Having despaired of Zainab's answers the doctor asked her to cough, but no sooner did she raise herself up to respond to his request than she was beset by the most severe fit of coughing she had yet endured. When the doctor saw the pus that she spat out afterwards he raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders as if to say: 'It's too late for a cure, now that the illness has reached its most crucial stage.' But it made him shudder to see this girl, on whom the remnants of a former resplendent beauty were still visible, shrivelling up and hastening to her death.

Looking upon her with compassion, he explained that there was still great hope of recovery but that it depended on her telling him what was raging in her breast. Zainab sighed, her wide eyes full of entreaty and supplication which made him pity her even more. She wanted to tell him what he needed to know but she hesitated and withdrew as if her story were too sacred to be shared with another human being. Noticing

her hesitation, the doctor encouraged her by all possible means until she agreed to tell him a little about herself. In fact he did not need to hear very much and after reassuring her, he allowed the others back into the room and went outside, followed by Hassan.

As they crossed the stretch of land that separated the magistrate's house from the rest of the village, the sun had begun its descent and the shadows of the buildings lengthened. The first signs of night appeared in the sky although its blueness remained, clear and untainted, reflected in the pond where the breeze stirred the waves that followed one another across the surface of the water.

In the magistrate's house, the doctor took out his pen and notepad and wrote a prescription which he gave to Hassan. He told him to purchase the necessary medication from the pharmacist first thing in the morning and to follow the instructions precisely, at the same time advising him that his wife should spend at least two hours outside every day before sunset.

Hassan left them and when they were alone the magistrate asked the doctor about his patient's condition, to which he replied:

'Well although it's true that she may get better, it's also possible that she will not.'

Then they discussed other matters until it was time for the train that would take the doctor back to his district.

* * *

Hassan made sure that his wife took her medicine in accordance with the doctor's instructions and that she went out every day between midday and the time of afternoon prayer. He decided that she should go to their own fields, so the next day at noon Zainab set out with Hassan's sister who carried his lunch. They found Hassan sitting under a tree, having spent the morning ploughing the land in readiness for the sowing of the new cotton crop. Beside him the two bulls ate their fodder and in the middle of the field the plough divided the right side which was unturned from the left which was

covered with tilth. When he had eaten his lunch his sister returned to the house and Hassan resumed his work, leaving Zainab to sit by herself. Looking out across the lands belonging to Sayyid Mahmoud, she remembered the day she had almost passed out and Ibrahim had sprinkled water on her face while she rested in his arms. She imagined him in the fields, looking round as he used to do, then digging his spade in the ground and gazing towards her as though inviting her to come to him.

In the opposite direction Hassan drove the plough, cutting the dry earth into strips and teasing the bulls occasionally with his whip. The animals pulled with all their might, scattering clods of earth on either side. Reaching the end of one line he would lift the plough on its side before twisting it onto the next and in this way he would continue for the rest of the day, backwards and forwards along the length of the field beneath the heat of the burning sun that blackened his face. Meanwhile, tired of being alone in that place, Zainab got up to leave and when Hassan saw her he came to ask what she wanted. Replying that she wished to go home, she set off towards the village but after walking a short distance she felt as though something were driving her back to the field. She stopped beneath the shade of a tree and turned round but she could not stand for long. Overcome by exhaustion which beset her whenever she made the slightest effort, she sat in the shade staring at the fields, recalling the past and the days of her youth. That wonderful time when the heart is free to do as it pleases, drifting from one person to another until it finds its eternal partner. Those delightful days when Zainab could give herself to the person her heart desired.

Now her beloved was far away and there was nobody to whom she could reveal the secrets of her heart. The star of her life was setting, leaving her only with memories which sometimes consoled her but at other times brought the most excruciating torment. If her parents had not been so selfish, sacrificing her wishes in order to marry her to Hassan, she would still have been happy and healthy. Nature herself, by

her own inspiration, guides us to the right path. Blind prejudice turns us from it!

When a passer-by asked her why she was sitting alone, Zainab continued her progress until she reached the canal. As it was nearly time for the water round, she sat down to rest against a tree trunk and picking up some pebbles, she threw them one after another into the water that flowed gently by, reflecting the colour of the sky. The banks of the canal were smooth after the dredging with no grass or greenery upon them and the light of the afternoon sun, slanting across the landscape, cast shadows almost as long as the objects that stood in its path. A gentle breeze blew through the trees, shaking the leaves almost imperceptibly.

The first of the water fetchers arrived and after rinsing and filling her jar she called Zainab to help her lift it onto her head. Encouraged by her presence, Zainab assisted, but no sooner had she sat down again than the deathly cough almost choked her, making her eyes water and her veins swell until she had thrown up the blood and pus on her chest. The other girls hurried to see what was the matter but with eyes streaming and her heart bleeding in horror at what was happening to her, Zainab could only say:

'It's nothing. I'm all right.'

Then realising that she could not avoid their questions as long as she remained with them, she forced herself up and returned to the village. Approaching the house she saw her mother on the doorstep grinding pepper with a pestle and mortar, occasionally glancing down the road as though she were expecting her and hoping for some improvement. But Zainab was no different. Always weary, her strength sapped further with every move she made and the raging cough besieging her from one moment to the next.

They entered the house and went upstairs to the roof where Zainab rested her back against the wall. Her mother sat beside her, gazing at her face but the eyes which had once been so alluring now pleaded for mercy. The expression contained in them held her mother captive, unable to refuse any request. Seeing her daughter like this made her feel so helpless that

she wanted to beg forgiveness, although for what crime she did not know. After a period of silence she asked her how she was.

Zainab's heart was overflowing with memories of her absent lover in the wastelands of Sudan and she longed to disclose what she was keeping hidden, but the reproach that she imagined her confession would provoke made her hesitant. If her mother heard anything like that she would surely be full of rebuke, which Zainab could not bear. And if death were already close by, she would wait for it patiently until it came to take her to a place where there would be neither sadness nor torment, only the stillness of the final annihilation. Yet before that moment came was it not her duty to expose the crime that her parents had perpetrated in marrying her against her will? When her mother repeated her question, Zainab summoned up the courage to reply:

'My condition is as you see. I will probably soon be dead and all because of you. When I used to weep and tell you that I didn't want to marry, you said lots of people get married against their wishes and the relationship always becomes as sweet as honey. If only you'd given me a husband I could have loved I would have nothing to say but now I want to sever the ties between us forever. Tomorrow or the day after I shall die and I warn you mother, when the time comes for my sisters to marry, don't force them against their will for as you can see, it is a mortal mistake.'

Her eyes full of tears, Zainab could say nothing more. The effort had been almost too great and her mother, on hearing this, felt as though a stinging arrow had pierced her heart, inflaming her breast so that she too was unable to speak. They sat in silence and the sadness hanging over them only deepened the atmosphere of gloom.

Zainab trembled and the cough struck again, ripping her chest until she collapsed in pain, almost unconscious. Realising for the first time the full import of her daughter's suffering, her mother supported her in her arms but Zainab was hardly aware of her surroundings. Placing an emaciated hand on her chest she raised herself up, bringing a hint of colour to her

pale face, but after another bout of coughing she threw herself down again, weak and exhausted.

In the afternoon Zainab wanted to go outside and in spite of her weakness her mother agreed to accompany her to the fields. She was surprised when she did not take the road which led to Ammi Khalil's land but she could no longer resist her in anything. The humility she felt on account of her daughter's suffering meant that even if Zainab had asked for the impossible she would have done anything in her power to grant it to her.

Spring was in the air, new life unfurling in every corner. The sun's rays shone on the leaves of the trees and water was flowing once more in the canals. Larks and sparrows hopped on the dykes or hovered in the air and from time to time a flock of doves flew by, rejoicing in the sun and the season.

Followed closely by her mother, Zainab reached the watering place where she hesitated, unsure which path to take. Perceiving her consternation, her mother waited patiently for her to continue but when Zainab moved on, bearing left towards the tree, she fainted, totally drained of energy.

Having taken its share of spring decoration the tree was adorned with new leaves that shaded the earth below and the whole of nature was clothed in the fresh garb of springtime except for the clover that had been left for the cattle, wilting now as it awaited its coming death.

Zainab's mother tried to revive her, sometimes shaking her gently as if to wake her from a deep sleep, sometimes sprinkling her face with water but Zainab, lying prostrate on the stones, was unaware of anything her mother was doing. Despair crept into her mother's heart and with tears welling up in the corners of her eyes she lay beside Zainab's motionless body. Wrapping her arms around her she began to weep like a child as her beloved daughter in the prime of life and the spring of youth bade farewell to this earthly abode.

Zainab's words when she had accused her parents, echoed in her mother's ears as she lamented the fate of her hapless girl, imploring the heavens to show some mercy lest two

families be bereaved of their dearest. Straying among her thoughts, she felt Zainab stir beneath her whereupon she cuddled her like a baby, entreating her in the hope of any sound which would reassure her that she was still alive. And as though relieved for a moment of the burden she was carrying, Zainab sighed and opened her eyes. Then she tried to stand up until with her mother's help, she was propped up against the tree. Although she had regained consciousness she could not tell whether she had woken from a peaceful sleep or an awful dream and turning her eyes to the things around her, she sighed again and hung her head to the ground.

Her mother could find no words to say. Whenever she tried to speak something restrained her from moving her lips. At last she asked:

'Is there anything you want Zainab?'

Zainab did not reply but remained with her head bowed, so weak that she could not speak, and in her silence she experienced the dull sensation that a drugged person feels or someone so numbed by pain they are no longer aware of it, or anything else. When she did regain a little strength all she could say was:

'O mother, I'm going to die.'

Knowing that her worst fears were almost upon her Zainab's mother held onto Zainab and tried to lead her back towards the house, but Zainab's legs would not carry her. She could not walk and her mother had to decide whether to carry her on her shoulders as she had done when she was an infant, or whether to wait for someone with a donkey. But what was there to stop her from carrying her now? After the emaciation she had suffered under the onslaught of a fast approaching death she was barely heavier than in the days of her childhood. And in the closing stages of her daughter's life would anyone question the action of the mother who carried her? While she was wondering what to do, a farmer passed by, returning from the fields with his donkey so she called for help and they returned to the village where she entered the house with Zainab.

But no sooner did they reach the room than Zainab started

to cough up pus and blood and was stricken by fever which left her unconscious on the floor. She began to talk deliriously in broken speech and her mother shuddered when she heard her shout 'Ibrahim!' with her last remaining strength, after which she became so still that there was not even the sound of her drawing breath. She grasped her hand but it was cold. Her eyes were shut, her lips pale, all the signs of death visible upon her. In front of this terrible scene her mother's eyes were scorched with despair. She bent over her daughter, clasping her hands and crying: 'Zainab, O Zainab . . .?'

Then she fell to the ground like a collapsed mountain! Alone by the side of her eldest daughter, sinking in the sea of extinction, she whispered:

'It's over.'

At that moment her younger daughter arrived. Returning from her day's work to visit Zainab and seeing the cause of her mother's grief she crouched against the wall trembling with fear, then bursting into tears, she rushed downstairs. Ummu Jaziyya met her halfway and realising that something was seriously wrong she hastened towards the room. Zainab's sister reached the door where she met Hassan returning from the mosque with Ammi Khalil. He grabbed her by the hand but she managed to free herself and ran home to her father. Before he could ask her what was the matter, she told him between her sobs:

'Mother's weeping over Zainab!'

On hearing this he stumbled, as though struck by lightning, but quickly got up and hurried to Khalil's house. Finding the old man sitting alone, staring in front of him with the expression of one bereaved, he said:

'Has she died Khalil?'

But Khalil did not know.

In the room of death the two old women sat on either side of the dying girl. Her eyes rolled upwards and her mother knew that she should not be moved from the floor where she lay. Hassan sat by the door, his head in his hands, and tears of anguish which he had never shed before, flowing down his cheeks.

Zainab asked her mother to fetch an embroidered handkerchief from the cabinet and taking it in her hand she held it to her lips then placed it over her heart, her last words being that the handkerchief should be buried with her in the grave. In the middle of the night her eyelids closed and as she passed away into the depths of peace the wails of the two old women rose up, proclaiming in the emptiness of space, the death of this innocent girl.

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