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*The Fairy's Heel*

كعب الجنية

Translated by Diqqa.net collective (English)

## THE FAIRY'S HEEL

### Hama, the Eternal City: Abu Al-Fida

In front of the big blue sign that spelled, in white letters, "Al-Rastan," the truth leapt out at me: memory is the most beautiful place of refuge. Here was the world I loved. My mind grew unimaginably raucous; everyone who had ever inhabited it now wanted to soar and slip through my brain. The car stopped at a military checkpoint, and my father, who had retired from the army around 15 years ago, mentioned his rank, which had always eased our passage through the regime's military checkpoints.

Welcome to Syria, the land of checkpoints!

I was overcome with happiness as I read signs indicating the names of the villages I had learned by heart: (Ayyo...Besireen...). I remembered a wedding we once attended in Ayyo, whose residents are Greek Orthodox.

Fishermen stood on either side of the road, like in the old days, displaying the fish they caught from the man-made lake produced by the Rastan dam under the patronage of the fairy "Daughter of the Sea Reptiles." None of those fishermen will ever admit to making secret offerings to the Daughter of the Reptiles.

In the age of the Seleucids, Al-Rastan was named "Arethusa", and fell under the rule of Arab emirs from the House of Sampsigeramus, the monarchs of Homs.

The car takes us across the majestic bridge and over the valley. I study the left side, which seems more exciting. The luminous turquoise waters wave in the distance, and in the valley's depths I try to capture the remains of the arched bridge which Jan Bardi al-Ghazali, deputy of Syria following the Ottoman conquest, destroyed when he rebelled against the state, only to be defeated in Aleppo and attacked in Hama, so he demolished Al-Rastan Bridge on his way back to curtail his enemies' advances. Sinan Pacha renovated it many years later, and it was Abdallah Pacha El-Azm who put the finishing touches on the bridge.

Everything here is historic: battles, wars, blood, victories, downfalls, and massive destruction.

I missed Hama's red soil. The car drove straight over the protracted road in the direction of the city, its famed horns waving. Yes, this city has two mountain horns that shape its eastern terrain. They signal your approach to the city. They look like relics of an ancient Syrian goddess: Anat of the twin horns. The Canaanite deity who worships feverishly and avenges herself ruthlessly. The goddess of power and fertility and beauty. She is a microcosm of nature in its most intimidating shape. But who knows who Anat is today? Few are the ones who study history and manage to escape ignorance!

I like it this way—stripped of all but a few of the fruits Ibn Batuta had mentioned. My heart skips a beat whenever the city comes up in the literature of travelers who had visited over the years and wrote about it. Perhaps the oldest of them were Volnais in 1783, Burckhardt in 1812, Moriss Paris in 1914, and Monmarché in 1932. They were each enchanted by the city reclined in the arms of the Orontes River's branches and orchards, which feed on waters spilling from extraordinary waterwheels.

Your temperament and consciousness, the ghosts of your memory: everything is animated by approaching this city that had endured the passage of time and remained beautiful and radiant, despite the raw sadness carved into it by the events of 1982. (A terrible civilian massacre took place, due to the regime's attack on the Muslim Brotherhood; the greatest number of casualties was among the innocent, as is the habit of all wars. They leave no trace but a memory overflowing with every brand of violence). Death too is a memory. The years have passed and reproduced Hama's wounds across every other Syrian city. A trickling bitterness overcomes you, of which you cannot be cured. I was a child when we passed through the city burdened by the murder of swarms of its youth for political, religious, and sectarian reasons. Here, the opium of the masses ran into the forces of oppression, only to dress Hama in the black cloak of mourning, and orphan its remaining sons. I surrender to sentimentality whenever I contemplate my feelings for Hama.

We cross the Ain El-Losa hill, which was once a great cemetery before it was suddenly exhumed, on vague orders, and turned into a park. Perhaps it was because countless victims of the massacre had been buried in this cemetery; they believed that exhuming it could erase the past. Finally, we arrived at Al-Asi Square. An assortment of smells, sounds, and styles received us. Hama is still the Bedouins' capital. And lately, the desert was evacuated, and most of its residents trekked

to the urban fringe for menial jobs that barely satiate their hunger, forming a miserable belt of poverty and ignorance.

I leave the car, and emotions run high, and I head towards the Al-Asi Park. There the waterwheels turn, and sigh and sing, performing their spiritual, lofty conversations. The river is a conductor shepherding the music; it gushes dramatically with the inevitable violence of fate. I think: How many times has Hama wanted to run away with the waters of the Orontes, to outrun its horrific fates? Just like all the doomed and the miserable, desperate to flee with the force of life, free of chains.

Meanwhile, the aromas of Hama's famed dishes wafted out from every corner. The scent of Halawet el-Jibn and Sahlab emanates from Salora. And you hear the pounding of the eastern Booza, served with hazelnut and pistachio. And El-Shawy releases the smell of Esh el-Bolbol: flaky puff pastry filled with meat and pine nuts. The city carries the flavors and scents of the past with breathtaking grace. Ancient cities have mastered the art of crafting adroit accounts of what once was. Everything here invites you to be free, to emancipate yourself from your mind and chase Hama's beauty and pleasures.

Desire tore us apart. My mother would rather have Halawet el-Jibn at Salora, and my father would like us to take our treats to go and head towards the old alleys he knows so well, as he had studied and lived a part of his childhood, and his teenage years, in this city. Though he did not say it, I could predict exactly what my father intended. He wanted to visit his school, which had been turned into a museum. The castle belonged to the House of Al-Azm, one of Syria's most famous aristocratic families.

We grabbed our breakfast— Halawet el-Jibn and Esh el-Bolbol—and followed the “Al-Dabagha” passage. We walked on the shoulders of the Orontes basin, crossing the ancient alleys and those courtyards and muqarnas that transport walkers to the city's sumptuous past.

My father chose a corner directly adjacent to two waterwheels, one of which was larger than the other, like two sisters spinning with terrible ferocity. We raise our voices to hear one another over the clamor of the pouring water and the sound of the black, moist wood of the two waterwheels.

Sitting by the loud, roaring water produces an unimaginable feeling. The waterwheel's water gushes anxiously from every direction. Its mist befalls us like distant, ancient kisses, and the water's surface carries mysterious ripples—as though relics of the ghosts that thrive underwater by night. We finish our breakfast, we drink tea from the thermos. I take a cigarette from my father's favorite pack.

We continue our ascent towards the ancient palace that had been turned into a folklore museum.

Sunshine, the water's pulse, and birdsongs numb the ears. We pay our entry tickets, my father walking a few steps ahead of us, eager as usual, as he leads us to where he would sit near school and sell sandwiches to the students. He recalls how he was the only Bedouin in the early 1950s to attend an elite school. My grandfather was good friends with Ghaleb Bek Al-Azm and Nosouh Bek Al-Azm—for their shared love of hunting antelopes and chasing wolves in the desert—and the fruit of this friendship was their exceptional patronage of the boy Hawyan, the Bedouin who would catch a break and study at this private school.

We were greeted by the Magnolia tree. It is not a tree, but a queen. A verdant beauty; a seedling of the tree brought over by the English Lady “Jane Digby”, who was nicknamed “Mother of Milk”, and who married the Bedouin Sheikh Medjuel El-Mezrab, and lived in Damascus in the Al-Amarah district, and turned her house into a famous salon where she received the Emir Abdel-Qader Al-Jazaeri, along with the most popular figures and guests in Damascus, among them travelers, consuls, and merchants.

Branches spread out over an octagonal slab of marble inlaid with mosaics, the magnolia like a woman idling in her home. Under the weight of its branches, it feels safe and content, dozing like a beauty asleep for decades; nothing can disturb its peace, not even the near buzz of the boisterous Orontes. You are astounded by the scene that receives you as you enter through the gates of this ancient palace: a snapshot from heaven, befitting dreams. Home to the One Thousand and One Nights, and to the magical history of the dreams lying dormant on the shoulders of the Orontes.

There is a secret day on which Hama's women consume nothing that had been ground by a millstone. Instead, they eat wheat soaked in water! Don't you think that this is a tribute to Anat, the mother of the two horns, who killed Mut, chopped, corned and kneaded him, and then baked him to avenge the murder of her husband, Baal?! Relics of the legend of Baal, whose heart thaws to the seven-year drought that struck Hama's land.

This king descends with his lightnings, thunders, clouds, and rainfalls, but the mouth of the mysterious cosmic king, the terrible Mut, swallows him, and the horned wife, Anat, goes mad, so she wrestles her husband's killer, and disguises herself at times as a lion, and at others as a serpent with seven heads, before appearing in her true form: as a woman with two horns. A cry of vengeance emerges from her throat, and she kills Mut, slices him with a sword, grinds him with a pitchfork, grills him in fire, mills him, and buries him in the fields. Then she frees her love, Baal, from death, and he returns in the form of mellow green wheat. A violent biography of a woman's love, her loyalty, and her ferocity. Don't they say that Anat's scream is deadlier than a bullet?

We would never be able to crack the riddles of cities without understanding its women. Its girls and housewives, who carry the traces of the old civilizations that had collapsed in the face of successive conquests by the Jews, the Christians, and then the Muslims. Despite the religiosity that marks the people of Hama, its women are secretly and heedlessly loyal to Anat. They refuse to kill the snakes that invade their houses, and on the first day of July, they do not consume ground flour. Every woman is a seed of Anat, who is immortal. Anat, the triumphant healing power that releases her anger and envy and pursues the ugliest vengeance. Cities too are like women; vicious and vengeful, their hearts lacking in mercy. He who believes that Anat is asleep is mistaken! The mad moment comes when ruthless, raw power emerges and stabs the barren, lame life; the sleeping beast leaps, and turns over a new page, announces a new era. How else would we explain the stack of eras discovered by the Danish expedition atop the hill in the center of Hama, when they studied the castle's remains?! They uncovered 13 eras! Arab antiquities—including pottery and ceramic hand grenades—appeared in the castle's first layer, followed by Roman sarcophagi, Byzantine paraphernalia, Egyptian deities, Aramaic jars, Canaanite dolls, and Hittite monuments...!

The guard tells us about his fascination with the Magnolia tree and retells a story I am very familiar with. Though his words depart a mouth well accustomed to uttering them, he still expects surprise to manifest in the eyes of the crowd. Though we didn't manage to fake surprise, we nodded our heads, like those who had heard the strange story many times over.

Jane Digby, the English Lady, was one of the most famous romantic adventuresses. She married, and divorced, Lord Ellenborough. King Ludwig I of Bavaria fell in love with her. And she loved the Austrian prince Schwarzenberg, and then Baron von Venningen, and then the Greek prince Theotokis, who became king, and later, an Albanian general. And finally, she set out to visit Tadmor, where she fell in love with the Arab Bedouin Medjuel El-Mezrab.

She wasn't just one woman; she was sedition itself. She was ten women in one, at least. She was frequently married and had many lovers. She was the French novelist Balzac's muse, inspiring his novel *The Lily of the Valley*. Her photo still hangs in the hall of beauties in Munich, while her gravestone in the protestant cemetery in Damascus bears the engraving: "Lady Jane Digby El-Mezrab."

Honestly, I've always found in Jane Digby an iconic, explosive female figure that only emerges every so often. A woman with lustful tendencies, wrapped up in a romantic biography. She brought the Magnolia tree to Damascus, which bloomed its large, delicate white flowers. Digby herself never allowed anyone to touch the vast woman inside her. She never paid much attention to the loyalties or attachments enforced by societies and traditions. Absolute rebellion, mixed with female passion; she wanted to capitalize on every drop of her youth and beauty. A woman who had discovered the recipe of changing clothes like serpents change skin. And who showed us we can always remain new by reinventing who we love and who we hate, as well as where we go. "Reinvention and shedding your old skin" was for Jane Digby a careful method of revenge against the masculinity that had overtaken history since the elimination of the female goddess.

We return to Al-Asi Square. We continue sailing through Hama's aesthetics, and we walk into the old coffee shop opposite the waterwheels.

The coffee emits the rich aroma of cardamom. So the city becomes a work of art, a cinematic scene that cannot be forgotten. The waterwheel rotates, fleetingly immersing itself in water, descending from the sun's madness overhead to the callous darkness of the icy waters of the Orontes.