

perpetual crises
particularly severe and keeps recurring year after year, most people prefer death or killing; they may even move away rather than have to face this prolonged agony of waiting. Others are driven to a level of vindictiveness and cruelty which people find hard to credit; indeed the perpetrators of such cruelty can hardly believe their own behaviour when they recall it later on and in different circumstances. For, if a man cannot vent his spleen on clouds and Him who sends them, then victims of another type have to be found. Husbands who normally show a great deal of tolerance and never swear or take a sudden swipe at anyone seem quite ready to abandon their normal behaviour without the slightest sense of remorse. At the least provocation they hit out and scream bloody murder over the most insignificant things. People who usually manage to put up a merry and optimistic front will be abruptly transformed into bitter scrooges, something which shows in both their attitude and behaviour. Even the most devout people who normally consider everything brought by the heavens as a test for mankind soon fall prey to these symptoms. In fact, they start swearing and blaspheming much worse than anyone else, to such an extent that people who have known them for ages wonder to themselves how such seemingly devout people can keep such a staggering lexicon of curses and wicked thoughts stored up inside them.

This then was the way most people behaved during that long, cruel year. Needless to say, every village and town in this microcosm had its own particular features and way of life: special names, cemeteries, drunkards, lunatics, rivers and streams to provide drinking water, and wedding seasons after the harvest. The village of al-Tiba was no different. It too had its own particular life-style, its graveyard and its weddings. It had its fair share of lunatics too, but they were not always in evidence. They had a special, crazy presence of their own. Sometimes they would seem big and strong; at others they could be utterly stupid and weird. But, in spite of everything, people sometimes managed to forget all about them. Al-Tiba also had its share of weddings, joys and sorrows too. More often than not, the weddings came after the harvest. When there was no rain and the ground became parched, the sad times came.

Wedding ceremonies might involve just a few people and for a specific period of time, but when years of drought came around, the gloomy expressions were everywhere to be seen, and the feeling persisted for a long time.

As is the case with villages throughout the world, al-Tiba has things of which it is proud. In other contexts these things may not seem particularly significant or important. But, as far as al-Tiba is concerned, they form a cross-section of those special features which set it apart from other hamlets and villages. They represent the result of the action of time and nature in all its cruelty, something which is not the case elsewhere. For example the inhabitants of other villages may have loud voices. Peasants will often have shrill, high-pitched voices. They talk a mile a minute and spice their chatter with proverbs and aphorisms. That is the way peasants are all over the place; it stems from sheer habit and the distances which separate people from each other in the fields, or else from the fact that they have to shout at some animals which go astray or others whose peculiar temperament takes them off to distant, unknown places, or it may even be due to the distance between houses and the gardens and orchards around them (in which a large variety of vegetables are grown). All these factors have combined to produce in the inhabitants of al-Tiba a particular kind of temperament. Many other factors could be cited as well. As a result, people in al-Tiba have a particular way of talking. Someone hearing them speak for the first time without being aware of the way they are and how they relate to each other might imagine they were squabbling or that a dispute had turned so nasty that something terrible was about to happen.

If this was all that was involved, it would not be terribly significant, particularly as far as it concerns peasants and those who understand their temperament. However these characteristics are accompanied by a special narrative technique which

is the stock-in-trade of the people of al-Tiba. They will often meander away from the main topic and indulge in reminiscences. When they are telling stories culled from history, they milk the situation for all it is worth. If it were not for this trait, their special temperament would not be obvious at all, nor would the ever-present anxiety which characterizes everyone who lives in this village and others around it. Actually the trait may even reach as far as the city itself or at least some of its outer suburbs.

The people in al-Tiba know how to turn a story in that incredible way which makes everything seem to be of primary importance. This talent is passed on from father to son. As a result, in other people's eyes they come to seem special and even manage to persuade and exert some influence. This phenomenon cannot be explained away by suggesting that the whole thing is actually some kind of trickery or even flattery, or that it shows a malicious streak. It is quite simply a habit, and one that is subject to endless repetition.

There were those long nights when people would gather round and tell each other tales. These would go on and on. Challenges would be issued, and competitions would follow. All this would take place on summer and winter nights, in barns, alongside the village spring or clustered around braziers. The stories would all be fast-paced and effective, as close to a dream-world as one could imagine. People who were not good enough to participate in these story-telling sessions became totally different as soon as they found themselves among other people. They would retell the stories they had first heard in al-Tiba and embellish them with all the novel elements of fantasy their hearts desired. The resulting stories seemed so clever and skilful that they aroused as much admiration as envy.

Everyone who is born in al-Tiba, young or old, is a good listener. Actually in some unique way the younger ones may be even more gifted in this regard than their elders. They will repeat everything they have heard many, many times, either to each other or else to themselves. As a result everything gets recorded in people's memories; nothing is ever forgotten. To this store of information are added ideas and maxims which

either crop up on the spur of the moment or else are dictated by the needs of urgent situations which people often have to face. Occasionally they will resort to this mental archive of theirs, but the stories which emerge always manage to sound exciting and important.

Al-Tiba relies for its livelihood on rain and agriculture and the thin strip of land which is irrigated by the spring. It's hardly surprising then that people always feel uneasy at the thought of the advent of years of drought. They make the most intensive preparations for such an eventuality by keeping a cow or two in every household or else a number of sheep. When the drought actually does come, they cannot even feed their own children, let alone animals. They proceed to unload a lot of their animal wealth on to shepherds and try to get rid of their remaining beasts by either slaughtering them or selling them off. There are actually fewer shepherds in al-Tiba than in a number of other villages, but they are skilful enough to be the envy of many people. A shepherd who is able to take the sheep of ten households out to pasture and knows what to do in the various seasons and where to take the animals will suddenly reappear during years of drought, even though he may have been out in the desert for a long time. He now has a particular hold over the owners of these sheep: he can sleep and reside in any house he likes without feeling the slightest bit shy or diffident. Shepherds like these have hidden talents which are not normally seen during good seasons. However, when drought comes, they become evident. The shepherds camp on the outskirts of the village. Some of them concentrate on hunting, but that does not make them lose the habits they have acquired as shepherds. People in al-Tiba have a truly remarkable knack for story-telling. They soon realize that these shepherds have lost the knack because they have been spending so much time with animals far out in the desert wastes. On the other hand, they are well aware that shepherds learn to deal with these prolonged periods of silence by singing wonderful songs. They accompany themselves on wooden instruments, and that is something which no one else can do really well. They even perform regularly at weddings and harvest festivals and on sad occasions too.

This is why shepherds become so indispensable during drought seasons and also because they know the places where animals are to be found. In general they are not very good at hunting, and no love is lost between them and real hunters. Shepherds are forever singing and playing those 'hellish' instruments (that is what the old people like to call them). They love showing off whenever possible, and never more so than when people are gathered together and some sort of performance is called for.

The village of al-Tiba marks the beginning of the desert proper. To the East are the orchards, the spring and then the market-place. The horizon marks the beginning of a chain of mountains. To the North and West broad plains stretch away into the distance interrupted once in a while by hills. These are sown with a wide variety of cereals and are also used to grow wheat, barley, vetch, clover and certain kinds of herbs. Close to the village itself vegetable greenery starts cropping up near the fruit trees. To the South the terrain becomes gradually more and more barren; the soil is flecked with outcrops of limestone chips. Bit by bit it changes. By the horizon it has turned into sand dunes, and then the desert itself starts. When the climate is good, al-Tiba is verdant and bursts into bloom on all sides. At the beginning of spring it is a riot of roses and other plants of all shapes and colours. Even the South side which seems so cruel and forbidding towards the end of summer manages to produce its own treasures from the bowels of the earth. People are at a loss to explain how all this can happen and how families in al-Tiba feel constrained at the beginning of spring to go out and pick all the incredible fruits which have till then remained buried beneath the ground. This entire festival season brings back memories of days of old when life was even more splendid and fruitful.

This particular village is marked by qualities and features which are not similarly bestowed on other villages around it. Even shepherds who have been given the responsibility of finding good pasturage will not venture close to al-Tiba's

grazing grounds or traverse a fixed borderline. They know full well what the people in al-Tiba are like, the kind of temper which is their hallmark, and the stupid things they are liable to do if a stranger infringes on their means of sustenance or life-style.

People who live in al-Tiba know all about such things; in fact they constitute the villagers' trademark. Those who have to deal with them are also well aware of these traits. There are some villages which manage to produce many sons from their corporate belly, send them out all over the place and then lose track of them. With al-Tiba the whole thing is completely different. The village manages to engender in its children a kind of nostalgia which can never be forgotten. Even people who travel a lot and go far away never miss any opportunity to mention the village's name. They always hanker after the good old days and long to return to spend their final days there. Those who do not regard it in quite that light still think seriously about going back from time to time. They will spend a few days there having a wonderful time and reminiscing about things which happened in days of yore. They walk past every single house, sit in the market cafe and the other cafe by the spring, and take great gulps of the air, hoping that it will give them all the strength they need to face the future and persevere with that new life which they have begun elsewhere.

There were times when people liked to reminisce about the good old days. But the hard times also had a particular fascination of their own. Memory managed to turn even the greatest hardships into an odd type of heroism; so much so that people found it difficult to believe that they had actually managed to put up with everything and still carry on!

This sense of loyalty which people in al-Tiba feel towards their village home is not restricted to any one aspect nor indeed to the people who live there. People who leave the village to earn a living or to study elsewhere and who live in faraway places are not content simply to send home flour, sugar, letters and a few other items; they come back and spend a good deal of time there, especially when they fail to convince their relatives in the village to come and live with them in their new place of residence. The time they spend back in al-Tiba causes them a

good deal of sorrow; that much is undeniably true. They cannot hide the sadness they feel, particularly when they notice that there is only a trickle of water from the spring and that the stream has run dry. They hear the sound of axes smashing into the trunks of dessicated trees, and the whole thing makes them feel as though they are the ones being throttled. Add to all this the tales of people who have moved away and been separated from friends and relatives, young and old, and the melancholy feelings of the returnees turn into a touch of nerves. The conversation takes a new tack: they start blaming and criticizing the old people, even though they themselves are much younger.

'We've told you hundreds of times,' they yell at the old people, 'this land's only good for feeding rats. That's all. But you people keep hanging on here as though it's paradise on earth. Give it all up and move to the city! You'll find life there a thousand times better than it is here!'

Silence ensues. The people living in al-Tiba, especially the older ones, will stare sadly at the people speaking to them. For a few moments it may appear as though they have never set eyes on those faces before and do not recognize to whom they belong. At other times the old people get the impression that they are listening to someone else or that the city has managed to corrupt them completely and made them talk that way.

The old people have an endless stream of pictures running through their minds: memories of al-Tiba in a wide variety of times, good and bad; when grass used to grow on the rocks and roofs of houses; when springs used to burst out of the ground all over the place. They would breathe in deeply as they recalled all these details. It was as if they could sense the smell of fertility being fostered in all living things, not merely human beings, but animals and minerals too. They remembered everything, but most of all they recalled how wonderful the food used to taste; and would that set the saliva flowing!

The village children had long since left al-Tiba and settled in the city far away. Even so they did not really mean everything they said. It was not deliberately rude. The thing which induced them to say these things and even more to act as they did was the way the same problems kept recurring. But, in spite

of all the argument, the village offspring in their new homes kept mentioning al-Tiba. They would tell everyone what a fantastic village it was, unlike any other village in the entire region. Nor were they satisfied just to talk about the village. So strong was their sense of attachment that, on many occasions when nostalgia got the better of them, they would do the most unbelievable things. They would go back to the village to have their weddings and celebrate anniversaries. They used to send their sons there for the summer to spend some time living as they had done when they were young. And, when they themselves felt the urge, they would invite their friends to spend a few days in that wonderful region around al-Tiba.

'In al-Tiba the sky seems very close,' they would say, 'and it's as clear as can be. The nights bring their own thrill with them, something you can't match anywhere else in the whole world. When fresh fruit and dairy products are available, they're absolute heaven. Fresh skimmed butter, chicken, lamb cooked on a wood fire, all this and lots more besides; there's just nothing like the way they are in al-Tiba! And then there's the hunting! There's plenty of it to be had: partridge and rabbit, and even some wild species which have died out in most other places. All these and more you can find in the deep valleys around al-Tiba. There's lots of spring water to be had too. In years when the rainfall is plentiful, springs burst out through cracks in the ground and gush from under every rock. The water's cold and fresh; you can't drink enough of it!'

This is the way they would talk about the village. Whenever fruit from the village reached the city in small baskets, the village people who now lived there would keep turning it over again and again, just looking at it. They preferred offering it to guests and talking about it. Once in a while the conversation might turn to the subject of dairy products obtainable in the city, whereupon you would often see their expressions change. If you were quick off the mark, you might catch an expression which managed to combine disgust and nostalgia. For just a moment or two the impression would be left that the only food they could tolerate had to come from al-Tiba; nowhere else would do. A whole host of factors was at work in the hearts of both those who remained in the village and those who left. The

the shot was fired at a bird, his intention would be clear: 'You're for Umm Sabri,' 'You're for Da'ud the blind man,' 'You're for Said who's no good at anything except having daughters!'

These are the kinds of things 'Assaf would say to himself while hunting. When he went round the village knocking on people's doors, he was anxious not to scare people by making them think the very worst: maybe that a friend or relative had died, or something like that. So, before the door was opened, he used to yell out: 'It's 'Assaf. I've come to spend the evening with you!' And without waiting to listen to the torrent of abuse which would descend on him, he would leave a few birds and be on his way!

He used to do this every single night. He would leave just one bird for himself; on occasion there would be none left at all. When he had finished his task, he would start preparing ammunition for the next day's hunting, working by the light of a small lantern. This was a task where neither exhaustion nor interruption could be excused or condoned. It was late in the evening by the time he had finished. After a quick bite to eat he would soon be sound asleep and snoring his head off. He used to have any number of dreams, each one filled with myriad pictures. What was al-Tiba like then and now, he would ask himself. Why does life get more difficult day by day? Images of trees and birds would waft by, followed by a non-stop flow of water and spring blanketing endless spaces with its blooms and colours. Then he would see everything in flight; the entire sky would be full of birds. Hunters would only hunt in season, and then only those birds which needed to be hunted. Then there would be images of people who had died. When rain started falling, he began to worry that the ground would get waterlogged and he would not be able to get back. He started running ... That made him start in his sleep, and he woke up, feeling scared that time might indeed have passed him by. He could feel the dusty atmosphere in the room and rubbed his eyes so that he could check on the time. He had an internal clock of his own which never went wrong. All these years, summer and winter, it had never let him down. People used to come out from the city. They would make copious preparations to go hunting with 'Assaf: they would set alarm clocks and give the strictest

instructions that they were to be woken up at the right time. They were worried that 'Assaf might leave them behind and go on his way. His pretext would always be that the sun was up and the day was being wasted; he used to tell them that they needed to be in the target area by sunrise. These people would always get the time wrong, whereas 'Assaf never did; his clock was always automatically right!

For ages and ages 'Assaf had been used to hunting on his own, taking only his dog with him. But even he found it hard to refuse to take other people with him, especially if they were guests or during years of drought. He would have much preferred to be on his own. But what was he supposed to do when the ground had completely dried up, the clouds had long since vanished, and people had nothing left to eat? Previously he had kept certain hunting grounds to himself and vowed he would never show them to anybody or even let anyone else get close to them. But now even he could not keep them a secret long. Even so, he used to issue stern warnings:

'Don't shoot at the females. They're the ones which give us all the rest!'

He was not always convinced they fully understood. 'The females,' he would add, 'I mean the female partridges, are smaller, and their colouring is more subtle.'

Even then they might still ask for more clarification and information. 'Like some human beings,' he would continue, 'the partridge cock is a coward.' He would stare at them all and laugh. 'It gets very scared. It has very bright colours, much brighter than the hen. And it will fly off before she does!'

They would all nod their heads in acknowledgement, but 'Assaf still had his doubts about these hunters. He particularly disliked the cowards and tricksters among them. But what worried him more than anything was that one day al-Tiba might find nothing to hunt at all.

'These birds belong to us,' he would say with some anxiety. 'Either for today or tomorrow. If we're careful about conserving them, they'll be here for us to hunt. But if we kill them all or hunt them too much, they'll make an end of it and look for somewhere else to live.'

He pictured a land totally devoid of partridges to hunt.

'Listen, you people,' he yelled testily. 'If these birds disappear and we get a year of drought, and if the government keeps telling us a pack of lies year after year and not building that dam, you can be sure that the people of al-Tiba are going to die, the whole lot of them. I'm convinced of that. How can any decent person kill human beings or birds just for fun?'

This kind of conversation would be heard at the start of every hunting trip. But in spite of everything, 'Assaf felt himself compelled to take a veritable caravan of hunters to the spots where partridges were to be found. Most of the time he would resort to a certain amount of cunning. He used to take them to the more out-of-the-way, risky and difficult areas, knowing full well that, when hunters feel tired or scared, they lose a lot of their more rapacious instincts and become more considerate. That, at any rate, was the way he had things planned at the start of the season. However life in al-Tiba soon became even rougher than usual; hunger began to impinge and take its toll of some people. 'Assaf paused long and hard before breaking many of the bounds which he had imposed on both himself and others. But eventually he had no choice. It used to break his heart. He unleashed a whole stream of curses and proceeded to do a whole series of stupid things.

'Look!' he used to say to justify the terrible wrong he was committing, 'if people don't eat the partridges, the jackals and wolves will get them anyway. Even if some of the damned animals managed to get away, shepherds would still come and pick up the eggs. People in al-Tiba mustn't be allowed to die!'

He had his own particular philosophy which had been formed and honed by both time and experience. Even if he had been willing to explain what was going on inside his mind, he would not have been able to do so. If he were asked why he was doing this or that, he would look baffled. 'That's what hunting is all about,' he would say. 'That's the way real hunters do things.' And that would be it!

This then was the way he would deal with the question of hunting. He followed this philosophy himself and expected everyone else to do the same. When the season for migratory birds arrived, he would feel profoundly relieved and gratified.

'All of you buckle down now!' he used to say, enunciating

clearly so that everyone could hear him. 'Every hunter has to prove himself!'

His aim in making this statement was to take the minds of other hunters off partridges. Actually they were already tired of hunting the bird. Their feet had become sore from clambering up high rock cliffs and penetrating far into remote valleys. Deep down they positively welcomed his suggestion and wholeheartedly supported it.

'Assaf's the best hunter around,' they would tell themselves and others by way of justifying their actions. 'If that's what he has to say, then we should certainly believe him and go along with his suggestion.'

'Assaf was anxious that the whole thing should not be seen as a trick, pure and simple. He used to take them out to the place where migratory birds would be found and to other spots where they would fly over. He never stinted about providing them all with the information they might need to help them get a larger bag of birds. Through some obscure process of admiration they flocked round him and let him take them wherever he decided and at whatever hour of the day. That way he made sure some partridges were left alive in remote areas.

'Once they feel secure again and realize that the gunshots have stopped,' he told himself confidently, 'they'll return to their nesting-grounds and live in peace again. The eggs will hatch, and a new batch of chicks will populate the mountains and valleys again!'

Actually 'Assaf is well aware of the fact that every animal and bird can defend itself; it knows where to go when danger threatens. It is just that, as he watched novice hunters getting more and more rapacious and thoughtless, breaking every rule in the book as they did so, he used to reflect sorrowfully that in the end people would die because partridges might well disappear.

'They kept hunting gazelles until they'd killed them all off,' he added after a long silence. 'The desert's been turned into one gigantic graveyard; the only things it produces are dust and death. People in al-Tiba have got to learn to be more intelligent than other people and not just kill everything off.'

In years like this one some unknown instinct would teach