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ASHES OF A LOST COUNTRY

The Tragedy and Hope of a Countryless Palestinian

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Chapter 1

The Hay Trusser and the Bluebells

I inherited that calm from my father, who was a farmer. You sow, you wait for good or bad weather, you harvest, but working is something you always need to do.²

Miguel Indurain

It was autumn time in Palestine. Some birds were raiding and picking at the grain, but people threw stones at them to scare them off. It was the sowing season for barley and wheat, in *Tishreen al Awal* (which comes from the Assyrian calendar that has existed since 4750 BCE), which stands for October, and the birds, the trees, the little wind, the men, and the women were celebrating this ceremony of nature like they did every autumn. As the young man paced slowly along the furrow in the freshly ploughed field, sowing seeds with his hand along with other men, something attracted his attention and he paused. Turning his eyes towards the noise, he could see a group of women coming to the fields carrying straw platters on their heads – of course, a sign of food coming. That young man never imagined that one of the young women among them would change his life forever.

As most of these hired workers came from nearby villages, the landlord took it upon his shoulders to feed and lodge them for the whole seed-sowing season. It was a heavy burden, but the harvest was going to be good this year.

² Miguel Indurain, Brainy Quote, Miguel Indurain Quotes, <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/m/miguelindu287586.html>, accessed 7 November 2016.

The men could not stop working. They had to resist the aroma of the food, as they had to finish sowing the furrow and then leave a mark where they had stopped. Otherwise, they would lose track of where they had sowed seeds, and that could bring the landlord's wrath, which was something they had to avoid if they wanted to get their wages.

As the men gathered under the tree, the women with the straw food platters on their heads slowly set the platters on the ground. The men sat in a circle around the platters and began to eat. The platters contained little bowls and plates of fresh green and black olive pickles, zaatar, which is ground thyme mixed with sesame, olive oil, cut tomatoes harvested from this year's garden, boiled eggs, white goat cheese, home-made yogurt shaped like ping-pong balls swimming in olive oil, eggplant pickles, home-made grape jam, and of course, a heap of fresh barley loaves baked in the earth oven. The penetrating fragrance of zaatar, especially the freshly ground thyme, reminds you, as an observer, that you are in Palestine.

The men devoured their food in the twinkling of the eye. An observer would be able to see how hungry they were as the little bowls and plates began to shake and dance on the straw platters and the food began to disappear. Within a very short time, the plates were shining and they did not require any washing! While the men lay down to rest and take a break, they chatted about the sowing season and other related farmers' tales. The women who had brought the food were busy kindling a fire in a portable clay stove to make tea for the men. Without a cup of tea in the old times, in Palestine, men would either fall asleep or go astray, as this was an indispensable daily drink. Almost no one could do without it.

One of the women who had been making tea came carrying a tray with glass cups. Her nervousness was obvious as the cups were dancing on the tray, which also held a very big soot-covered metal teapot. Just before she could set the tray on the ground, a man's hand reached for the tray and took it gently from her. The woman, who did not expect this, was startled. She looked very nervous when her eyes met the man's eyes, something that should not have happened in those days, as it was considered a sin for a woman to look into a man's eyes. As their eyes met, never mind the sin, the man who took the tray stood stupefied, mesmerized by the woman's wonderful blue eyes, the color of bluebells, with long eyelashes that had penetrated deeply into his heart. The young woman, in her twenties, blushed, which fascinated him more. Reaching to adjust her headscarf that had fallen onto her shoulder, she rushed away to join the other women.

Shyness was a valued trait in a woman and a quality that qualified her for marriage. On the other hand, if a woman was described as being as brave as a man, this would tarnish her reputation and jeopardize her chances of getting married and may bring disgrace to her family. As the shy woman turned her back, the man could observe her slender, elegant, shapely figure, and her feminine attractive walk with that wasp waist, which wreaked havoc on his brain. He was dazzled by that creation. In his daze, he whispered, “*Ma sha Allah*,” a phrase uttered by Muslims to show appreciation, admiration, and gratitude to God, and then he added, “God bless the creation,” as if he had just been charmed by a masterpiece. That night, like every night, the men sang and danced and their voices reached the stars.

Oh! One of an elegant height.
Stop so I can tell you,
You are going abroad and your country is better for you.
I am afraid you will get established there
And find someone else and forget me here.

Because it was early October and the air around them was cold, they huddled by the fire and chatted. Shadad’s mind was somewhere else. Someone had stolen his mind, but he did not mind, because the thief was so beautiful. One of his friends came and shook his shoulder and said in a loud voice, “Hey, Shadad. I pray that the one who stole your mind shall not enjoy it” – a very common popular comment addressing one who seemed to be in love. Everyone roared, laughing.

Shadad’s mind was fixed on that young woman. Her bluebell eyes had left him motionless, and she had tormented him with her gazelle-like walk. He wondered, *Is she from the landlord’s family? Or a relative? Or a hired girl to help in feeding the workers?* “Who is she?” he kept asking the workers, but no one had an answer, as they had not even noticed her. That night, Shadad gazed at the stars, thinking of the woman whose scarf had fallen on her shoulder. Her brown hair had fascinated him. He was already enthralled.

The second day, as the workers were sowing the seeds and were almost at the end of the furrow, they could hear some singing in the far distance. Then from behind the hill, the same group of women appeared, carrying the straw platters on their heads. They were singing as follows:

Oh Laya! Oh Laya! You, girl,
Treading to the water spring,
Your parents have told me
You are mine.

The women were singing in unison so loud that their voices echoed in the nearby hills and valleys. The men paused, feeling elevated and delighted by the singing. The men dropped their tools and hurried towards the tree, where the women put the food platters on the ground. One of the women shouted, “Hey, men, come and eat your breakfast.” Each man left a mark where he had stopped, and then strode to the tree towards the fragrant food.

Shadad, the man who had just fallen in love, was thinking of his girl and was looking for her, but she was not there. He shivered, asking himself, *Didn't she come today? Did someone from her family discover that her scarf had fallen and a stranger saw her hair? Or, because she had committed the sin of looking a man straight into his eyes, was she detained?* As he was in the middle of all that thinking, he saw his girl near the fire stove trying to light the fire. He approached her and asked the squatting girl if she needed help. Too shy to utter any words, she said nothing. Obviously she had trouble kindling the fire, and apparently it was her turn to make tea for the workers today. He stood looking at the same woman, the same eyes, and the same fallen headscarf, which she did not bother to adjust today, and he felt in heaven. “What’s your name?” he asked.

With some hesitation, and avoiding his eyes, she stuttered, “Hamda.”

“The best of names,” he commented – a customarily polite statement people sometimes say when they meet someone for the first time. “And are you from here?”

“Yes. I am AbuFayed’s sister.”

As she said that, Shadad went dumb, as if a heavy rock had fallen on his head and he was now staggering. He realized that he was now talking to the landlord’s sister. “AbuFayed,” he whispered to himself, “the landlord himself.” Perhaps this would be the end of a beautiful dream!

That evening was the end of the seed-sowing season. The men spent the night and in the morning they received their wages from AbuFayed, the landlord. He praised their hard work and told them that he would like

them to come back in Huzairan – the Assyrian name for the month of June – for the harvest season. Hearing that, Shadad’s heart leapt out of his chest and danced. It kept dancing for a while, because the news was a great joy to his heart and he could not keep it inside his chest.

Then he shivered when he realized that it would be almost eight months until harvest time, and during that period he would die a thousand times while thinking of Hamda and what fate held in store for him. How could he wait all those months away from the bluebell eyes and the brown hair? How could he forget her and how she walked? How could he go to the landlord and tell him, “I love your sister and I want to marry her?” He shuddered when he imagined AbuFayed summoning his tall Achilles-like brothers and ordering them to dump the scum and make Shadad never again turn his face towards this place! That would be unthinkable.

AbuFayed bid the men goodbye as he walked with them to the edge of the village. He thanked them and reminded them to come back in the summer for the harvest. Shadad and the other men started the journey back home to nearby villages. Some were riding their donkeys, others were on foot. As it was the first quarter of the twentieth century, automobiles were very rare in Palestine and the most common means of transportation were donkeys, mules, sometimes camels, rarely horses, and mostly number 11 vehicles – as walking on foot was referred to figuratively. Those who could afford to buy a donkey were much luckier. The journey would take them a day, and then in the evening they would be home. Those married ones were going to bring joy to their families with the money they had earned from the ploughing and sowing season.

Shadad now had one main thing on his mind. Day and night he dreamed of Hamda. His goal was to marry her. As he settled in his village, Assara, almost twenty kilometers from Touras, Hamda’s village, after a season of roaming, he began to summon all his strength and all his mental capabilities. At the top of all his list was to begin to save so he could achieve his dream of marrying AbuFayed’s sister. He started consulting friends and relatives, asking them how he could ask for her hand. Many of his friends and relatives advised him to wait until the harvest season was over.

Some pessimistic individuals mocked him, saying that his dream to marry AbuFayed’s sister was a dream like Satan’s dream of entering heaven. *But*, Shadad thought, *what if I approach Hamda’s eldest brother asking for her hand? He is her guardian because her father is dead.*

According to social custom, it is the eldest brother who decides the fate of the women of the family. What if the brother disagrees? Then Hamda cannot resist, besides, AbuFayed does not know if she is in love with me, and her brother has the final word. Unfortunately, Shadad's mother had died and his sick father, oblivious of everything, spent most of his time by the window ledge rolling cigarettes, smoking, coughing, and *farting*, as Shadad used to say. There was no use talking to him. Shadad had to sort things out by himself.

Shadad did not possess money, neither gold nor silver, but he possessed something more valuable, one quality that distinguished him from most men and made him stand out in the crowd and caused everyone to look up to him in that era of ignorance: he was educated and had the ability to read and write. In the first quarter of the twentieth century, if you were somewhat literate and could spell the Arabic alphabet, you were seen as the best of all men and everyone would envy you. Schools in the modern sense did not exist in villages. Very few men, like Shadad, managed to learn how to read and write by attending the teaching circle of the Imam – Preacher – at the mosque, where they would learn to recite the Quran, read and write Arabic, and do some arithmetic. Once Shadad was asked how much money they had to pay the Imam in those days. He laughed, saying, “We paid him an egg or two, some wheat, and some barley. And if he demanded more eggs, he would have caused a crisis in the house.”

Having acquired the ability to read and write, Shadad had access to reading great old Arabic literature like *One Thousand and One Nights*, or as it is known in the west, the *Arabian Nights*. Another famous book he was reading was *Kalila wa Dimna*, “One of the most popular books ever written... a bestseller for almost two thousand years, and a book still read with pleasure all over the world. It has been translated at least 200 times into 50 different languages.”³ Above all, Shadad had read and understood the Holy Quran and memorized most of it. His Arabic cursive handwriting was unmatched, so beautiful it was. Shadad was considered very educated by early 20th century standards.

That night, when Shadad had the entire evening to himself, he sat in a corner. His father had fallen asleep, so his coughing had stopped. The cow's moos in the shed below had died down. Shadad took out his precious

³ Paul Lunde, ‘Kalila wa-Dimna’, *Saudi Aramco World*, 23/4 (July/August 1972), 18–21.

diary, his straw pen, and his ink bottle, and sat down at his little handmade coffee table to write. It was very rare to see someone keeping a journal in those days, and Shadad was exceptional. The first thing on his mind was his first encounter with the young woman who had stolen his mind. He wanted to put the experience down in writing so it stayed eternal as one of his fondest memories. He wrote, ‘An angel treaded into my world. Her face eclipsed the moon, her eyes challenged the blue sky on an August day, her walk lit fire in men’s hearts, and her hair framed her white face like a full moon on a dark night.’

As the months passed slowly, Shadad patiently waited, doing some jobs here and there, and saving money to marry AbuFayed’s sister. Being far away, he found that the distance and the days tormented him, as he had no chance of seeing Hamda, not even once, unlike the girls in the village, some of whom went out to work in the fields and did some errands, giving the men a chance to glance at them. And if a man liked a girl, he would rush to his mother, who would investigate her background and might ask for her hand.

In the village, everyone knew everyone else, so looking for a bride was not a daunting task. But Shadad’s destiny had dragged him to fall in love with a woman who lived a day’s walk from his village and descended from an affluent family. The divide between him and her was very wide. Besides, marrying a woman from another village was a more complex matter than marrying a local woman. Women’s families did not trust strangers and needed time to investigate the man’s background. Being from another village, Shadad stood little chance of marrying the woman of his dreams, the bluebell-eyed beauty. He whispered to himself with agony, “God have mercy on me and prevent a repeat of *Layla and Majnun*” – an Arabic version of *Romeo and Juliet*.

June (Huzairan) was approaching and the harvest season would soon begin. Shadad’s heart was filled with joy and expectation as finally he was going to meet the woman of his dreams. Reapers and hay trussers in the village, after getting ready, travelled in a convoy to Touras, Hamda’s village, to work in the vast wheat fields that stretched as far as the eye could see. Everyone carried their tools in baskets dangling on their backs that contained a sickle, a small hoe, and a leather apron to protect their thighs and lower body while tying the stalks in sheaves, as stalks have thorny points and can hurt the skin.

As the men arrived in Touras, AbuFayed welcomed them, slaughtering a sheep. The men enjoyed a traditional meal of meat and rice before they started their hard task of reaping under the hot sun of June. Touras' wheat plains lay in the valley of the River Jordan, where the sun beats hard and sometimes the heat soars to high records in the reaping season.

The reaping season being tough, men, children, women, donkeys, and some camels all labored hard to get the crops out of the fields and to the stone threshing floors adjacent to the fields. Men sang at the top of their voices. Singing while laboring was a feature of Palestinian peasants' life. One of the common ballads that was passed from generation to generation was this one:

Hey, tall and good-looking lad.
Wait, stop, let me tell you,
Going abroad to a strange land:
Your country is better for you.

In those days, workers were hired and paid in two distinct fashions: they either got their wages on a daily basis or agreed with the landlord to complete the job within a specified period of time and then got a lump sum of money. This latter fashion had the advantage that if the team of men finished the job faster, they could move to another landlord and get more money. Otherwise, they would take a loss. So, everyone on the team had to work hard. But by the end of the day, men, women, animals, and even the birds were sweating in the heat. All thanked God when the sun set and they all returned home or to the camp.

Shadad had more than one chance to see Hamda and exchange looks with her that told him she liked him. She even giggled a little sometimes whenever she and Shadad crossed paths while Hamda was rushing to join the other women. Because of traditions, they had never been able to talk or chat. That might bring suspicion and Shadad could lose his job. The situation would spin out of control and tribal mentality would force him to abandon his dream. This is why he kept his distance and settled for revealing his emotions to his closest friends from his village. One of these men told Shadad he was interested in Hamda's sister.

Returning to his village at the end of the reaping season, armed with wages that he collected from his hard work, Shadad began to make plans to ask for Hamda's hand. After consulting with some of the village elders

who possessed more wisdom than he in such matters, and with his closest friends, the conclusion was reached that Shadad should wait a little while longer, considering the financial gap between him and Hamda's family. Shadad worried that someone else with a better financial and social status would come forward and that AbuFayed would force his sister to marry such a man. An old man kneeling on his rosary and looking at the ground commented on Shadad's fears, saying, "Everything is *maktoob*, my son" – that is, destined by God. "Whether you fly to the seventh sky or swim the seven seas, you will only get what has been *maktoob* for you." With those powerful words, Shadad gained faith. He submitted his case to his God and waited.

One morning, the village witnessed unusual activity when the *muezzin*, the man who calls for prayer and who also serves as the news announcer – equal to social media these days, was shouting from the top of the mosque, "Hey, people of the village. Those who can hear me, tell those who cannot. If any man above the age of eighteen wants to join the army, then he should proceed to the *mukhtaar's* [head of the village] house and bring with him his birth certificate or any other identification documents. Those present, please tell those absent." The men, after hearing that, whispered to each other and wondered, looking puzzled. "What army is the *muezzin* talking about? The war is over and the Turks have fallen and are gone forever," someone said.

One man said, "Let's go and see."

Outside the *mukhtaar's* house, there was a large crowd of men, but the main attraction that everyone was gazing at was the black Ford automobile that was parked there with a soldier who was holding a rifle and standing next to the car. Everyone wanted to touch that strange object, but the soldier looked grim and unfriendly. Thinking that he might empty his magazine into their bodies, they stayed away from the Ford. Suddenly, the *mukhtaar* came out and yelled at people to keep quiet. Then he said that those who could read and write very well should come to the front, that those with some literacy should stand behind them, and that everybody else should stand in the very back. Shadad's chance has finally come; he would be able to marry Hamda. He stood in front of everybody else with confidence. If God wills, everything in the world will support you to make your dreams come true.

As Shadad entered the room for his interview, he found himself facing two officers; one looked English, and the other had an Arab look. To his

amusement, the English officer started speaking in Arabic. The Arab officer asked Shadad to read a paragraph from a book, which he did very well. Both officers asked him many questions about his past, his knowledge of history, and even his knowledge of politics, which he answered very well. The officers were impressed because they had landed on someone who could be a teacher and a military coach instead of a typical soldier. They finally asked Shadad to read a statement expressing his allegiance to the king, which Shadad did just before he signed up. A week later, the whole village was bidding goodbye to Shadad and the others who had been recruited by His Majesty's army, which made the recruits the envy of the whole world. Whether you fly to the seventh heaven or swim the seven seas, you will realize the destiny that has been written – *maktoob* – for you.

For three months, no one had heard anything from Shadad, but then one afternoon, an automobile – a taxi – arrived in the village and stopped in the middle of the village square. The sight of an automobile was something very rare. It drew everyone's attention because only VIPs could ride in those machines. Shadad emerged, wearing his military outfit and looking very handsome. There was a rapturous welcome from the onlookers. Everyone wanted to shake hands with him. Young men were begging him to help them join the army. All the village notables came to welcome him, and then they all walked in a procession to the village common guest house, where young and old came to shake hands with the returning hero, and women ululated from windows and rooftops.

As Shadad was talking about his life in the military, everyone paid attention and wondered how that was different from the village routine, which did not consist of anything but taking the sheep to graze in the morning and returning with them in the evening. Shadad talked about the complex weapons he had been trained to use and his everyday training, and said he had even shaken hands with His Majesty, which made everyone gasp. Someone exclaimed, "You shook hands with the king himself!"

A few days later, Shadad, in his shining well-ironed military uniform, and some notables from the village were sitting with AbuFayed, Hamda's eldest brother, in his guest room so that Shadad could ask for Hamda's hand. In Shadad's culture, there were some rituals involved in asking for a woman's hand, and is still the case now. First, both families investigate each other's background and dig deep into each other's history by asking

their friends, neighbors, relatives, and so on. If the woman's family members are satisfied and have no suspicion after the man has proposed, they give their approval. The bridegroom's family has to send a delegation to the bride's family to formally ask for her hand. The delegation – called *Jaha* in Arabic – typically consists of the bridegroom's father, some male family members, clan notables, and village notables. The delegation might be very big, depending on the family's status.

The bigger the *Jaha*, the more impressive the members are. The delegation typically appoints a spokesman who is the most eloquent in the delegation, knows some of the Quran by heart, and is a respected figure in the community. However, if the bridegroom's father meets these conditions, then he becomes the spokesman. The bridegroom does not talk at all; he just sits like a statue. The appointed spokesman is the one who addresses the woman's guardian, if the father is dead, and asks for her hand to be wedded to their son. On arrival, a full cup of coffee is placed in front of the spokesman only. The tradition is that if the woman's father or guardian agrees to their request, the spokesman will sip the coffee, and if not, the delegation leaves and the coffee stands as it is. In fact, this tradition is somewhat similar to drinking a toast to the bride and bridegroom in Western cultures.

A full cup coffee was placed in front of Shadad's spokesman, who launched into his speech, looking at AbuFayed and mentioning some verses of the Holy Quran that urge men and women to marry and raise a family. He recited the most quoted one: 'O Mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another.' (49:13) He then went off a spiel, praising AbuFayed's clan while pointing out some of Shadad's qualities, especially his education that qualified him to be bestowed the honor of marrying their honorable daughter.

AbuFayed replied, "Your faces are a good omen. You will get from me what you came for. We gift you Hamda from our hearts to be Shadad's life partner, and we ask God to bless this marriage." At that point, the spokesman took one sip from the cup of coffee that had been placed in front of him. Then all stood up and a hugging session started. Shadad and AbuFayed hugged each other very warmly.

A month later, the village witnessed the wedding of Shadad and Hamda, the latter of whom arrived from her village accompanied by many of her family members. Shadad and Hamda tied the knot and a dream had

been achieved. Finally, Hamda and Shadad found themselves under one roof to raise a family.

This is the story of how Alghadanfar's parents courted and then married. But the story of how Fadiya, Alghadanfar's mother's sister, had married a man from the village from another clan, lived at the top of the hill, and raised a big family remains a mystery to him. She was the only person from his mother's side who had lived in the village.

This, perhaps, was one of the factors that had contributed to his miserable childhood, because while the other boys and his peers had many uncles, cousins, and nieces from their mothers' side, he had none. In the old tribal society of Palestine, the more numerous the tribe was, the more support a person would have. In fact, it has been testified in that culture that relatives from the mother's side have warmer feelings and stronger emotions than those from the father's side.

Very often, your uncle's son is like your brother, and your uncle is like your father. This is how the peasants' society was structured. Unfortunately, Alghadanfar's clan was the exception to the rule – very divided and a very individualistic tribe.

Alghadanfar's parents' romance and marriage was one of the many true stories that his father, Shadad, had told him when he was a child before the two were separated by the Israeli military occupation of their land. Shadad, who was a great storyteller, enriched Alghadanfar's childhood with his infinite store of stories and knowledge, which in turn played an important role in shaping Alghadanfar's personality and his future.