

The Book of Granada

excerpted from *Leo Africanus*

by Amin Maalouf

Translated by Peter Sluglett

with a preface by Peter Sluglett
and a glossary of terms

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Preface to excerpt of *Leo Africanus*

by Peter Sluglett

Leo the African, Amin Maalouf's novel first published in French in 1986, is a fictionalized biography of a real person, Hasan al-Wazzan, born in Granada in 1488, four years before the last of the Nasrids, Boabdil (Muhammad XII) handed over the city to the Catholic kings of Aragon and Castile. Hasan and his family were forced to flee to Fez, where he grew up and became a wealthy merchant, with agents in Tlemcen, Sijilmasa and Marrakesh. In 1510-1513, he made the first recorded traverse of Africa, from Fez to Timbuktu and then eastwards across the savannahs to the Nile, and then down the Nile to Cairo.

In Cairo, he witnessed the execution of the last of the Mamluk generals of Egypt, and the conquest of the city and the country by the Ottomans in 1517. After making the pilgrimage to Mecca in 1518 he was captured, apparently by pirates, in Tunis -- but found himself at the center of a grand design master-minded by Pope Leo X (in the face of a Catholic world driven by internal feuds and the rise of Lutheranism) to expand the authority of the papacy by attempting to convert the Muslim world to Catholic Christianity. Leo/Hasan was to be the native informant and the main implementer of the scheme. Formally baptized a Christian, he remained in Rome between 1519 and 1527; the impracticality of Leo X's plans was abundantly clear to his successor Adrian VI, and it was quietly dropped. Hasan/Leo remained in Rome writing the *Description of Africa* on which much of this extraordinary novel is based. He returned to Tunis in 1527.

This is the bare bones of the story, the basic facts of Leo/Hasan's eventful life and travels. The novel (which is written in the first person) gives an intimate and vivid picture of many aspects of the narrator's world; his family life as a child, his education, his marriages, the birth and childhood of his own children, memorable descriptions of his travels, the courts of Fez, Timbuktu, Cairo, Constantinople and Rome, and the great political events of his day which he either witnessed or heard about from contemporaries. But perhaps the most vivid sense conveyed by the book is the bitter-sweet nostalgia of exile, the longing for the home and society which he left:

I was your age, my son, and I have never seen Granada again. God did not ordain that my destiny should be written completely in a single book, but that it should unfold, wave after wave, to the rhythm of the seas. At each crossing, destiny jettisoned the ballast of one future to endow me with another; on each new

shore, it attached to my name the name of a homeland left behind. (p. 81)

What is especially beautifully evoked is the hugger-mugger atmosphere of the cities, Granada at the end of the fifteenth century, where, in spite of the obvious threat to the imminent collapse of the existing order, there was a deep sense of tolerance, of Muslims, Christians, and Jews living peacefully alongside each other. This sense of tolerance, and a deep hatred of fanaticism and bigotry, whether religious, ethnic or social, and equally, a sense of the necessity to understand and have compassion for the more naive aspects of human frailty pervade all of Maalouf's novels, but perhaps this one most powerfully.

Some time in the middle of 1500, the narrator's maternal uncle returned to Fez from a mission to the Ottoman sultan, whom he and his companions had tried to persuade to take up arms against the Castilians, in an attempt to restore Granada to the Muslims. To a group of visitors, his uncle says that one day soon the Castilians will be beaten, that Andalus will become Muslim once more, and that each one of us will be able to return to his home. Later, when the guests have left, the uncle tells the nephew that in reality, none of the great Muslim powers of the day (the Ottomans, the Iranian Safavids, the Mamluks of Egypt) was actually concerned with the fate either of the exiles (i.e. those of Fez) or those left behind in Granada.

You will ask me, my uncle said why I should have told those people who were here the opposite of the truth. You see, Hasan, all those men still have hung up on their walls, the key to their houses in Granada. Everyday they look at it, and looking at it they sigh and pray. Every day their joys, their habits and a certain pride come back to their memory, and these things they will never rediscover in exile. The only reason for their existence is the thought that soon, thanks to the Great Sultan or to Providence, they will find their house once again, with the color of its stones, the smell of its gardens, the water of its fountain, all intact, just as it has been in their dreams. They live like this, they die like this, and their sons will do so after them. Perhaps one day it may be necessary for someone to dare to teach them to look unflinchingly at their defeat, to explain to them that in order to get on one's feet again one must first admit that one is down on the ground. Perhaps someone will have to tell them the truth one day. But I do not have the courage to do so. (p. 124)

Peter Sluglett, translator
May 1999

Glossary for *Leo Africanus*

Note: Most of the terms in the novel which would not be familiar to the English speaking reader have been explained within the text of the translation, usually in the same sentence in which the terms is used. For this reason, we are not offering a heavily glossed version of the novel.

Ramadan: Islamic month of fasting

qasba: city quarter

suqs: bazaars, commercial districts

diwan: office, governmental or administrative bureau

majlis: gathering place, gathering

qadis: a Muslim judge

salam alaikums: greetings and salutations, literally means peace be upon you.

'alim: learned, especially one learned in Islamic sciences

hammam: public baths

amir: prince

'Id: festival; *'Id al-Adha* or the Feast of Sacrifice marks the last day of the Hajj (or the pilgrimage to Mecca) and *'Id al-Fitra* marks the end of Ramadan.

tabib: physician

zakat: annual alms tithe of 2.5 percent levied on wealthy Muslims

iftars: meal breaking the fast, e.g. during Ramadan

sura: a chapter of the Qur'an

A note on the Islamic calendar:

Muslims societies have used a number of different calendars to mark and reckon time. The religiously based calendar depends on the lunar, rather than the solar, cycle.

Because the lunar month, determined by the waxing and waning phases of the moon, varies in length from 29 to 30 days, the lunar year is usually about 11 days shorter than the solar year. The starting date of each month is determined by the appearance of the new crescent moon. Consequently, a new day begins at the sunset of the previous day. In other words, Friday night in the Muslim calendar begins after sunset on Thursday. The starting point of the Muslim calendar is the historical migration of the Prophet Muhammad to Medina in the year 622 C. E. This event is known as the hijra, and so the calendar is known as the Hijri calendar. The chapter headings of this novel are based on Hijri dates.

The Book of Granada

I, Hasan the son of Muhammad the weigh-master, I, Jean-Leon de Medici, circumcised at the hand of a barber and baptized at the hand of a pope, I am now called the African, but I am not from Africa, nor from Europe, nor from Arabia. I am also called the Granadan, the Fassi, the Zayyati, but I come from no country, from no city, no tribe. I am the son of the road. My country is the caravan. My life the most unexpected of voyages.

My wrists have experienced in turn the caresses of silk, the abuses of wool, the gold of princes and the chains of slaves. My fingers have parted a thousand veils, my lips have made a thousand virgins blush, and my eyes have seen cities die and empires perish.

From my mouth you will hear Arabic, Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin and vulgar Italian, because all tongues and all prayers belong to me. But I belong to none of them. I belong only to God and to the earth, and it is to them that I will one day soon return.

But you will remain after me, my son. And you will carry the memory of me with you. And you will read my books. And this scene will come back to you: your father, dressed in the Neopolitan style, aboard this galley which is conveying him towards the African coast, scribbling to himself, like a merchant working out his accounts at the end of a long journey.

But is this not in part what I am doing: what have I gained, what have I lost, what shall I say to the supreme Creator? He has granted me forty years of life, which I have spent where my travels have taken me: my wisdom has flourished in Rome, my passion in Cairo, my anguish in Fez, and my innocence still flourishes in Granada.

The Year of Salma al-Hurra

894 A.H.

5 December 1488 - 14 November 1489

In that year, the sacred month of Ramadan fell in high summer. My father rarely left the house before nightfall, as the people of Granada were short-tempered during the daytime. Quarrels were frequent, and a sombre bearing was regarded as a sign of piety; only a man who was not keeping the fast could smile under the fiery heat of the sun, and only a man who had no concern for the fate of the Muslims could remain cheerful and friendly in a town exhausted from within by civil war and threatened from without by the unbelievers.

I had just been born, by the unceasing grace of the Most High, in the last days of Sha'ban, just before the beginning of the sacred month. My mother Salma was excused from fasting while she recovered, and my father Muhammad was dispensed from groaning, even in the hours of heat and hunger, as the birth of a son who would bear his name, and one day bear his arms, is a matter of legitimate rejoicing for every man. Furthermore, I was the first born son, and when he heard himself called 'Abu'l-Hasan', my father's chest swelled imperceptibly; he stroked his moustache and slid his two thumbs slowly down his beard while glancing up at the alcove on the floor above, in which I lay. However, even his overwhelming joy was not as deep and intense as that of my mother Salma, who, in spite of her continuing pain and physical frailty, felt herself born again by my arrival in this world, as my birth transformed her into the first of the women of the household and assured her of my father's continuing regard in the long years ahead.

Long afterwards, she confided to me the fears which my appearance had unwittingly assuaged, if not entirely banished. She and my father, cousins betrothed to each other since childhood, had been married for four years before she conceived, and had felt around them as early as the second year the buzzing of defamatory rumors. To the point that Muhammad came home with a beautiful Christian girl, with black braided hair, whom he had bought from a soldier who had captured her in the course of a raid into the country near Murcia. He called her Warda, set her up in a room overlooking the patio, and even talked of sending her to Ismail the Egyptian to teach her the lute, dancing and calligraphy, like any favorite of the sultans.

'I was free, and she was a slave,' said my mother, 'so we were not evenly matched. She had all the wiles of seduction at her disposal; she could go out unveiled, sing, dance, pour wine, wink her eyes, and take off her clothes, while I could never, as a wife, abandon my reserve, still less show the slightest interest in your father's pleasures. He used to call me "My cousin"; he would refer respectfully to me as *al-hurra*, the free, or *al-'arabiyya*, the Arab, and Warda herself showed me all the deference a servant girl owes to her mistress. But at night, she was the mistress.

'One morning,' went on my mother, her voice still choking with emotion in spite of all the years that had passed, 'Gaudy Sarah came knocking at our door. Her lips were stained with walnut root, her eyes dripping with kohl, her fingernails steeped in henna, and she was enveloped from head to toe in a riot of ancient crumpled silks which breathed sweet-smelling perfumes. She used to come to see me - may God

have mercy upon her, wherever she may be! - to sell amulets, bracelets, perfumes made from lemon, ambergris, jasmine and water lilies, and to tell fortunes. She immediately noticed my reddened eyes, and without me having to tell her the cause of my misery, began to read my palm like the crumpled page of an open book.

'Without lifting her eyes, she said these words, which I remember to this day: "For us, the women of Granada, freedom is a deceitful form of bondage, and slavery a subtle form of freedom." Then, saying no more, she took out a tiny greenish stoppered bottle from her wicker basket. "Tonight, you must pour three drops of this elixir into a glass of orgeat syrup, and offer it to your cousin with your own hand. He will come to you like a butterfly towards the light. Do it again after three nights, and again after seven.

When Sarah came back a few weeks later I was already having my morning sicknesses. That day I gave her all the money I had on me, a great handful of square dirhams and maravedis, and I watched her dancing with joy, swaying her hips and tapping her feet loudly on the floor of my chamber, making the coins dance in her hands, the sound of their clinking together mingling with that of the juljul, the little bell which all Jewish women had to carry.'

It was indeed time that Salma became pregnant, since Providence had ordained that Warda had become pregnant already, though she had taken care to conceal her condition for her own protection. When this came to light, two months later, it became a contest as to which of them would bear a son, or, if both had sons, which would be the first to give birth. Salma was too full of apprehension to sleep, but Warda would have been quite content to give birth to a younger son, or even a daughter, since, according to our Law, the mere act of giving birth would entitle her to the status of a free woman, without having to give up the delicious frivolity which her slave origin permitted.

As for my father, he was so overjoyed at having been vouchsafed this double proof of his virility that he never had the slightest inkling of the bizarre competition taking place under his roof. Just before sunset one evening, when the condition of both his wives had become sufficiently advanced to be plainly visible, he commanded them both to accompany him to the threshold of the hostelry where he used to meet his friends, near the Flag Gate. They walked hand in hand several paces behind him, shrinking in shame, my mother from the inquisitive scrutiny of the men and the sniggering of the old gossips of our quarter, the most garrulous and most idle in the entire suburb of al-Baisin, who were watching them from the upper rooms of their houses, hidden behind curtains which parted as they walked past. Having shown them off sufficiently, and having no doubt himself felt the force of these glances, my father pretended to have forgotten something and took the same road back home, as darkness was beginning to obscure the countless dangers of the alleys of al-Baisin, some muddy and slippery in the spring rain, others paved but even more dangerous, as each gaping flagstone could turn into a fatal trap for the mothers-to-be.

Exhausted and disorientated, almost at breaking point, and with Warda for once united, she collapsed onto the same bed, the servant's bed, since *al-hurra* was unable to struggle up the stairs to her own. My father went back to the hostelry, quite unaware that he could have caused the loss of both his future children at the same time, hurrying, no doubt, according to my mother, to bask in his friends' admiration and in expectation of their good wishes for the birth of two fine sons, and to challenge our neighbor Hamza the barber to a game of chess.

When they heard the key turned in the lock, the two women burst out into a fit of spontaneous laughter and it was a long time before they recovered their composure. Recalling the incident fifteen years later, my mother blushed at such childishness, drawing my attention somewhat shamefacedly to the fact that while Warda was barely sixteen, she herself was already twenty-one. After this a certain bond developed which softened the rivalry between them, so that when Gaudy Sarah paid Salma her monthly visit the next day, she asked the servant girl to come and have her stomach palpated by the pedlar-clairvoyant, who also doubled, when necessary, as midwife, masseuse, hairdresser and plucker of unwanted hair; she could also tell stories to her countless customers, shut up in their harems, of the thousand and one scandals of the city and the kingdom. Sarah swore to my mother that she had become exceedingly ugly, which made her very happy, since this was an unmistakable sign that she was carrying a boy, and complimented Warda pityingly on the exquisite freshness of her complexion.

Salma was so sure of the accuracy of this diagnosis that she was unable to refrain from telling Muhammad about it that very evening. She also felt she could bring up another rather more embarrassing notion of Sarah's, namely that a man should not come near either of his wives during pregnancy for fear of damaging the foetus or causing a premature birth. Even though obscured by circumlocutions and interspersed with long hesitations, the message was sufficiently direct to cause my father to flare up like a dry stick and launch into a stream of barely intelligible invective in which the words 'rubbish', 'old witches', 'she-devil' kept being repeated like the blows of a pestle in the hollow of a mortar, as well as a number of other generally uncomplimentary remarks about medicine, Jews and women's brains. Salma thought

that he would have beaten her if she had not been pregnant, but also told herself that in that case the argument would of course not have taken place. To console herself, she concluded wisely to herself that the advantages of motherhood outweighed these passing inconveniences.

As a kind of punishment Muhammad strictly forbade her to receive 'that poisonous Sirah' in his house, hissing her name with the characteristic Granada accent which he was to retain all his life, which made him call my mother Silma, his concubine Wirda, the door '*bib*' instead of '*bab*', his town Ghirnata and the sultan's palace 'the Alhimra'. He remained in an extremely bad temper for several days, but with equal measures of prudence and vexation kept away from both his wives' bedrooms until after their confinements.

These took place within two days of each other. Warda was the first to feel the contractions, which then became less frequent in the evening and only became more intense at dawn; it was only then that she began to cry out loudly enough to be heard. My father ran to our neighbor Hamza, beat on his door and begged him to tell his mother, a worthy old lady of extreme piety and great skill, that the confinement was imminent. She appeared a few minutes later, wrapped in a white veil, carrying a broad-brimmed bowl, a towel and a piece of soap. She was said to have a lucky hand, and to have brought more boys into the world than girls.

My sister Mariam was born around noon; my father hardly looked at her. He had eyes only for Salma, who swore to him 'I shall not disappoint you!' But she was not so sure, in spite of Sarah's infallible prescriptions and her repeated promises. She had to endure two further interminable days of anguish and suffering before her dearest wish was granted, to hear her cousin address her as Umm al-Hasan, the mother of Hasan.

On the seventh day after I was born my father called Hamza the barber to circumcise me, and invited all his friends to a banquet. Because of my mother's and Warda's condition, my two grand-mothers and their servants took charge of the preparation of the meal. My mother did not take part in the ceremony, but she confessed to me that she slipped quietly out of her bedroom to see the guests and hear what they had to say. Her emotion was so great on that day that the most minute details became engraved upon her memory.

Gathered in the courtyard, around the carved white marble fountain, whose water refreshed the atmosphere with the noise of its splashing and with the thousands of droplets which it scattered, the guests ate with appetites made particularly healthy because it was the beginning of Ramadan, which meant that they were breaking their fast at the same time as celebrating my entry into the community of the believers. According to my mother, who had to be content with the left-overs the following day, the meal was a feast fit for a king. The main dish was *maruziya*, lamb prepared with honey, coriander, starch, almonds, and pears, and walnuts, as the season was just beginning. There was also green *tafaya*, goat's meat mixed with a bouquet of fresh

coriander, and white *tafaya*, made with dried coriander. Not to mention the chickens, the young pigeons, and the larks, in garlic and cheese sauce, the baked hare, coated with saffron and vinegar, and dozens of other dishes which my mother so often enumerated, recalling the last great feast which took place in her house before the fury of Heaven rained down upon her and her own. Listening to her as a child, I always waited impatiently for her to reach the *mujabbanat*, hot pies made of soft white cheese, dusted with cinnamon and dripping with honey, cakes made of dates or almond paste, and pastries filled with pine kernels and nuts, and perfumed with rose water.

At this feast, my mother swore piously, the guests drank only orgeat syrup. She forbore to add that if no wine was poured, it was only out of respect for the holy month. In Andalus, the circumcision ceremony was always the excuse for celebrations whose original religious purpose was often entirely forgotten. The most sumptuous of all these occasions was still remembered in our day, the feast organized by the Amir Dhu'l-Nun of Toledo to celebrate the circumcision of his grandson, a feast which all the world sought to imitate but never managed to do. Wine and liqueur flowed like water, while hundreds of beautiful slave girls danced to the orchestra of Dany the Jew.

But at my circumcision too, my mother declared, there were also musicians and poets. She even remembered the verses which were recited in my father's honor:

By this circumcision your son's light glows more brilliant,
As the light of the candle increases when the wick is trimmed.

Recited and sung in every key by the barber himself, this couplet by an early poet of Saragossa marked the end of the meal and the beginning of the ceremony itself. My father went up on to the terrace to snatch me in his arms, while the guests gathered in silence around the barber and his assistant, a young beardless boy. Hamza made a sign to his assistant, who began to go round the courtyard, lantern in hand, stopping in front of each guest. A small present had to be offered to the barber, and according to custom everyone pressed the coins he gave on to the face of the boy, who announced the donor's name in a high voice and thanked him before passing on to his neighbor. When the money had all been collected, the barber asked for two powerful lamps, unsheathed his knife, recited some appropriate Qur'anic verses and leaned towards me. My mother always said that the cry which I let out rang out over the whole quarter like a sign of precocious valour, and then, while I continued to scream with the whole of my tiny body, as if I had seen all the evils that were to come to pass before my eyes, the celebrations began again with the sound of the lute, the flute, the rebeck and the tambourine until the suhur, the meal just before sunrise in Ramadan.

But not everyone was in the mood for the celebration. My maternal uncle, Abu Marwan, whom I always called Khali, then a member of the staff of the secretariat at the Alhambra, arrived late at the feast with a sad and downcast countenance. An

enquiring circle formed around him, and my mother pricked up her ears. One sentence drifted across to her, which plunged her back for several long minutes into a nightmare which she believed she had forgotten for ever.

'We have not had a single year of happiness since the Great Parade!'

'That accursed Parade!' My mother was instantly overcome with nausea, just as in the first few weeks of her pregnancy. In her confused mind she saw herself once again a little girl of ten with bare feet, sitting in the mud in the middle of a deserted alley through which she had passed a hundred times but which she did not recognize any more, lifting the hem of her crumpled, wet and mud-flecked red dress, to cover her tearful face. 'I was the prettiest and most fussed over child in the whole quarter of al-Baisin, and your grandmother - may God forgive her - had sewn two identical charms onto my clothes one on the outside, and the other hidden, to defeat the evil eye. But that day, nothing could be done.'

* * *

'The sultan of the day, Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali, had decided to hold pompous military parades, day after day and week after week, to show the world the extent of his power - but only God is powerful and He does not love the arrogant! The Sultan had had stands built on the red hill of the Alhambra, near the Treason Gate, and every morning he and his retinue received visitors and dealt with affairs of state there, while innumerable detachments of troops from all corners of the kingdom, from Ronda to Basta and from Malaga to Almeria, marched past interminably, saluting the Sultan and wishing him good health and long life. The inhabitants of Granada and the neighboring villages both old and young, used to foregather on the slopes of Sabiqā at the foot of the Alhambra near the cemetery, from which they could see this continuous ceremonial taking place above them. Street sellers set themselves up nearby, selling slippers, or mergu s, doughnuts or orange blossom syrup.'

On the tenth day of the Parade, as the Islamic year 882 was ending, the New Year celebrations, which were always unostentatious, passed almost unnoticed amid the hectic tide of these continuous festivities. These were going to continue through Muharram, the first month of the year, and my mother, who used to go along to Sabiqā every day with her brothers and cousins, noticed that the number of spectators was constantly increasing, and that there were always many new faces. Drunkards thronged the streets, thefts were commonplace, and fights broke out between gangs of youths beating each other with cudgels until the blood flowed. One man was killed and several wounded, which led the *muhtasib*, the provost of the merchants, to call the police.

It was at this point that the sultan finally decided to put an end to the festivities, evidently fearing further outbreaks of rioting and violence. Accordingly, he decreed that the last day of the Parade should be 22 Muharram 883, which fell on 25 April of the Christian year 1478, but he added that the final celebrations should be even more

sumptuous than those of the preceding weeks. That day, on Sabiqa, the women of the popular quarters, both veiled and unveiled, were mingling with men of all classes. The children of the town, including my mother, had been out in their new clothes since the early morning, many of them clutching several copper coins with which they bought the famous dried figs of Malaga. Attracted by the swelling crowds, jugglers, conjurers, entertainers, tightrope walkers, acrobats, monkey-keepers, beggars, genuine and fake blind men could be found throughout the entire Sabiqa quarter, and as it was spring, the peasants were walking their stallions, taking fees for letting them mate with the mares that were brought to them.

'All morning,' my mother remembered, 'we had cheered and clapped our hands watching games of "table", during which one Zenata rider after another tried to hit the wooden target with staves which they threw standing up on the backs of their horses at a gallop. We could not see who was most successful, but the clamor which reached us from the hill, from the very place known as al-Table, gave an unerring indication of winners and losers.

'Suddenly a black cloud appeared above our heads. It came so quickly that we had the impression that the light of the sun had been extinguished like a lamp blown out by a jinn. It was night at midday, and without the sultan ordering it, the game ceased, because everyone felt the weight of the heavens on his shoulders.

'There was a flash, a sheet of lightning, another flash, a muffled rumbling, and then torrents of rain poured down upon us. I was a little less scared knowing that it was a storm rather than some grim curse, and like the other thousands congregating on Sabiqa, I looked for somewhere to shelter. My older brother took me by the hand, which reassured me but also forced me to run along a road which was already turning to mud. Suddenly, several paces in front of us, a number of children and old people fell down, and seeing that they were being trampled underfoot, the crowd panicked. It was still very dark, and shouts of fear were punctuated with cries of pain. I too lost my footing, and I let go my brother's hand and found myself trying to catch hold of the hem of one soaked dress after another without getting any purchase on any of them. The water was already up to my knees, and I was certainly yelling more loudly than the others.

'I fell down and picked myself up again about five or six times without being trampled on, until I found that the crowd had thinned out around me and was also moving more slowly, because the road was going uphill and the waves rushing down it were becoming larger. I did not recognize either people or places, and ceased to look for my brothers and my cousins. I threw myself down under a porch and fell asleep, from exhaustion as much as despair.

'I woke up an hour or two later; it was less dark, but it was still pouring with rain, and a deafening rumble assaulted my ears from all sides, causing the flagstone on which I was sitting to tremble. I had run down that alley way countless times, but to see it deserted and divided by a torrent of water made me unable to work out where I

was. I shivered from the cold, my clothes were soaked, I had lost my sandals in my flight, an icy stream of water ran down from my hair, pouring into my eyes which were burning with tears. I shivered again, and a fit of coughing seized my chest, when a woman's voice called out to me: "Up here, girl!" Searching all around with my eyes, I caught sight of a striped scarf and a hand waving from an arched window very high above me.

'My mother had warned me never to enter a strange house, and also that at my age I should begin to distrust not only men but also certain women as well. Thirty paces away, on the same side of the road, the woman who had called out to me came down and opened a heavy wooden door, making haste to say, in order to reassure me: "I know you; you are the daughter of Sulaiman the bookseller, a good man who walks in the fear of the Most High." I moved towards her as she was speaking. "I have seen you going past several times with him on your way to your maternal aunt Tamima, the wife of the lawyer who lives close by in the impasse Cognassier." Although there was no man in sight, she had wrapped a white veil over her face which she did not take off until she had locked the door behind me. Then, taking me by the hand, she made me go along a narrow corridor which turned at an angle, and then, without letting go of me, ran across a little courtyard in the rain before negotiating a narrow staircase with steep stairs which brought us to her room. She pulled me gently towards the window. "See, it is the anger of God!"

I leaned out apprehensively. I was at the top of the hill of Mauror. On my right was the new *qasba* of the Alhambra, on my left, far in the distance, the old *qasba* with the white minarets of my own quarter of al-Baisin rising above the city walls. The rumbling which I had heard in the street was now deafening. Straining to see where the noise was coming from, I looked towards the ground and could not suppress a cry of horror. "May God take pity upon us, it is Noah's flood!" murmured my protectress behind me.'

My mother would never efface from her memory the terrified child's vision which lay before her, nor would any of those who had been in Granada on that accursed day of the Parade ever forget it. A raging torrent cascaded through the valley through which the bubbling but placid Darro normally flowed, sweeping away everything in its path, devastating gardens and orchards, uprooting thousands of trees, majestic elms, walnuts a century old, ash trees, almond trees and mountain ashes, before penetrating to the heart of the city. Water carried all its trophies before it like a Tartar conqueror swallowing up the central area, demolishing hundreds of houses, shops and warehouses, destroying the houses on the bridges, until at the end of the day, because of the mass of debris which filled the river bed, an immense pool formed which covered the courtyard of the Great Mosque, the merchants' *qaisariyya*, and the suqs of the goldsmiths and the blacksmiths. No one ever knew how many were drowned, crushed under the debris or carried off by the waves. In the evening, when Heaven finally permitted the nightmare to fade, the flood carried the wreckage out of the city, while the water ebbed away more rapidly than it had flooded. At sunrise the agent of

death was far away, although its victims were still strewn over the surface of the shining earth.

'It was a just punishment for the crimes of Granada,' said my mother, repeating a well-worn maxim. 'God desired to show that His power has no equal, and wanted to punish the arrogance of the rulers, their corruption, injustice and depravity. He wanted to warn us about the destiny which awaited us if we continued to walk in our impious ways, but our eyes and hearts remained closed.'

The day after the drama, all the inhabitants of the city were convinced that the man primarily responsible for their misfortune, the man who had brought down divine wrath upon them, was none other than the arrogant, corrupt, unjust, depraved Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali, the son of Sa'd the Nasrid, twenty-first and penultimate Sultan of Granada, may the Most High erase his name from memory!

To obtain the throne, he had removed and imprisoned his own father. To consolidate himself in power, he had cut off the heads of the sons of the most noble families of the kingdom, including the valiant Abencerages. However, in my mother's eyes the Sultan's most heinous crime was to have abandoned his freeborn wife, his cousin Fatima, daughter of Muhammad the Left-handed, for a Christian slave girl called Isabel de Solis whom he had named Soraya.

'It was said,' she told me, 'that one morning the Sultan called the members of his court together in the Myrtle Courtyard so that they could attend the Rumiyya's bath.' My mother was shocked to have to recount this ungodly act; 'May God forgive me!' she stammered, her eyes turned towards the Heavens. 'May God forgive me!' she repeated (as she evidently intended to continue with her story).

'When the bath was over, the Sultan invited all those present to drink a small bowl of the water which Soraya had left behind, and everyone rhapsodized, in prose or in verse, about the wonderful taste which the water had absorbed. Everyone, that is, except the vizir Abu'l-Qasim Venegas, who, far from leaning towards the bath remained proudly in his seat. This did not escape the notice of the Sultan, who asked him why he did so. "Your Majesty," replied Abu'l-Qasim, "I fear that if I tasted the sauce I should immediately develop an appetite for the partridge." May God forgive me!' repeated my mother, unable to repress her laughter.

I have heard this story told about many of the notables of al-Andalus, and I do not know to whom it ought really to be attributed. However, at Granada on the morning after the accursed Parade everyone sought to find in the dissolute life of the master of the Alhambra the incident which could finally have exhausted the patience of the Most High. Everyone put forward their conclusive explanations, often only a verse, a riddle, or an ancient parable embellished with contemporary meaning.

The Sultan's own reaction to the calamities which rained down upon his capital was more disturbing than this idle gossip. Far from regarding this devastating flood as

a warning from the Most High, he chose to draw the conclusion that the pleasures of the world were ephemeral, that life was passing by and that he must drain the utmost from each moment. Such may have been the wisdom of a poet, but certainly not that of a ruler who had already reached the age of fifty and whose kingdom was threatened.

Accordingly he gave himself over to pleasure, in spite of the frequent warnings of his doctor Ishaq Hamun. He surrounded himself with beautiful slave girls and with poets of doubtful morals, poets who carved in verse after verse the forms of naked dancing girls and slender youths, who compared hashish to emeralds and its smoke to that of incense, and who nightly sang the praises of wine, red or white, mature yet always fresh. An immense gold loving cup passed from hand to hand, from lip to lip, and the one who drained it to the dregs was proud to summon the cup-bearer to fill it to the brim once more. Countless little dishes were pressed upon the guests, almonds, pine kernels and nuts, dried and fresh fruits, artichokes and beans, pastries and preserves; it was not clear whether this was to satisfy hunger or to intensify thirst. I learned much later, in the course of my long sojourn in Rome, that this habit of nibbling while becoming intoxicated was already common among the ancient Romans, who called these dishes 'nucleus'. It was perhaps for that reason that in Granada such dishes were known as 'nukl'? God alone knows the origins of things!

Devoted entirely to pleasure, the Sultan neglected the affairs of state, allowing those close to him to amass huge fortunes by illegal taxes and appropriations, while his soldiers, who did not receive their pay, were obliged to sell their clothes, their mounts and their arms to feed their families. In the city, where there was profound insecurity and fear for the future, where the rise or fall of each captain was rapidly known and commented upon, where news of the drinking sessions leaked out regularly through the indiscretions of servants or guests, the mere mention of the name of the sultan or Soraya brought forth oaths and curses and sometimes pushed the people to the very edge of revolt. Without needing to lay the blame directly on Abu'l-Hasan (which they only rarely dared to do) certain Friday preachers had only to rail against corruption, depravity and impiety for all the faithful to know, without a shadow of doubt, who was being criticized by implication, and they did their utmost to utter loud and recalcitrant cries of '*Allahu akbar!*' to which the imam leading the prayer would sometimes reply, in falsely enigmatic tones, 'The hand of God is above their hands,' all the while darting looks of hatred in the direction of the Alhambra.

Although he was universally detested, the Sultan still kept his eyes and ears in the crowd, who reported to him what was said, which made him the more mistrustful, brutal and unjust. 'How many notables, how many honorable burghers,' my mother recalled, 'were arrested because they had been denounced by some rival or even a jealous neighbor, accused of having insulted the prince or having besmirched his honor, and then made to parade through the streets sitting the wrong way round on a donkey before being throw into a dungeon or even having their heads cut off!' Under the influence of Soraya, Abu'l-Hasan made his own wife Fatima and his two sons, Muhammad, called Abu Abdullah or Boabdil, and Yusuf, live under house arrest in

the tower of Comares, an imposing square castle to the north east of the Alhambra, opposite the Generalife. In this way the mistress hoped to promote her own sons to power. The court was thus divided between the partisans of Fatima, numerous but necessarily discreet, and the partisans of Soraya, the only ones to have the Prince's ear.

If the tales of these internecine struggles in the palace gave the common people a means of whiling away the boredom of the long cold evenings, the most dramatic consequence of the growing unpopularity of the sultan was his attitude towards Castile. Since he was accused of favoring a Rumiyya over his cousin, of neglecting the army, and of leading an inglorious life, Abu'l-Hasan, who was not lacking in physical courage, resolved to cross swords with the Christians.

Ignoring the warnings of certain wise counselors who pointed out to him that Aragon had thrown in its lot with Castile as a result of the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabela, and that he should avoid giving them the slightest pretext to attack the Muslim kingdom, the sultan decided to put an end to the truce which existed between Granada and her powerful neighbors, by sending a detachment of three hundred horsemen to make a surprise attack on the castle of Zahara, which the Christians had occupied three quarters of a century earlier.

The first reaction at Granada was a great outburst of joy, and Abu'l-Hasan managed to regain some favor among his subjects. But, very soon, many began to ask themselves if, by involving the kingdom in a war where the outcome was by no means certain, the sultan was not guilty of criminal irresponsibility. The course of events was to prove them right; the Castilians replied by taking possession of Alhambra, the most powerful fortress in the western part of the kingdom, in spite of its apparently impregnable position on a rocky peak. The desperate efforts of the sultan to recapture it were in vain.

A major war unfolded, which the Muslims could not win, but which, if they could not have avoided, they could at least have delayed. It was to last ten years and end in the most ignominious manner possible. In addition, it was accompanied by a bloody and demoralizing civil war, so often the fate of kingdoms on their way to extinction.

In fact, two hundred days precisely after his success at Zahara, Abu'l-Hasan was removed from power. The revolution took place on the 27th of the month of Jumada al-Ula 887, 14 July 1482. On that very day Ferdinand was at the head of the royal host on the banks of the river Genil, under the walls of the town of Loja, which he had besieged for five days, when he was attacked unexpectedly by a Muslim detachment commanded by 'Ali al-'Attar, one of the most experienced officers of Granada. This was a memorable day, of which Abu'l-Hasan could have been proud, especially as the hero of the hour, acting under his orders, had succeeded in sowing confusion and panic in the camp of the Christian king, who fled towards Cordoba, leaving cannons and ammunition behind him, as well as a great quantity of flour and hundreds of dead and captives. But it was too late. When the great news reached

Granada, the revolt was already under way; Boabdil, the son of Fatima, had succeeded in escaping from the tower of Comares, it was said, by sliding down a rope. He was immediately acclaimed in the quarter of al-Baisin, and the next day his sympathizers enabled him to enter the Alhambra.

'God had ordained that Abu'l-Hasan should be overthrown on the very day of his victory, just as He sent down the flood on the day of the Parade, to make him bend his knee before his Creator,' observed Salma.

But the old sultan refused to acknowledge defeat. He took refuge in Malaga, rallied his supporters around him, and prepared to avenge himself upon his son. The kingdom was thenceforth divided into two principalities which proceeded to destroy each other under the amused gaze of the Castilians.

'Seven years of civil war,' mused my mother. 'Seven years of a war in which sons killed fathers and brothers strangled brothers, in which neighbors suspected and betrayed each other, seven years in which men from our quarter of al-Baisin could not venture alongside the Great Mosque without being jeered, maltreated, assaulted, or sometimes even having their throats cut.'

Her thoughts wandered far away from the circumcision ceremony taking place a few steps away from her, far from the voices and the clinking of cups which seemed strangely muffled, as in a dream. She found herself repeating 'That accursed Parade!' She sighed to herself, half asleep.

* * *

'Silma, my sister, still daydreaming?'

The harsh voice of Khali transformed my mother into a little girl again. She fell on her elder brother's neck and covered his forehead, his shoulders, and then his arms and hands with hot and furtive kisses. Touched but somewhat embarrassed by these demonstrations of affection which threatened to upset his grave demeanour, he remained standing, stiff in his long silk *jubba* with its flowing sleeves, his scarf, the *taylassan*, draped elegantly around his shoulders, his face only revealing the ghost of a protective smile as the sign of his happiness. But this apparent coolness did not discourage Salma in the slightest. She had always known that a man of quality could not reveal his feelings without giving an impression of levity which was not appropriate to his status.

'What were you thinking about?'

If the question had been asked by my father, Salma would have given an evasive answer, but Khali was the only man to whom she would reveal her heart as well as uncovering her head.

'I was thinking of the evils of our time, of the day of the Parade, of this endless war, of our divided city, of the people who die every day.'

With the flat of his thumb he wiped a solitary tear from his sister's cheek.

'These should not be the thoughts of a mother who has just given birth to her first son,' he declared without conviction, adding in a solemn but more sincere voice, 'You will have the rulers you deserve,' says the Prophet.'

She repeated the words after him: '*Kamatakunu yuwalla alaikum.*'

Then, artlessly: 'What are you trying to tell me? Weren't you one of the foremost supporters of the present sultan? Didn't you raise al-Baisin in support of him? Aren't you highly respected in the Alhambra?'

Stung to the quick, Khali prepared to defend himself with a violent diatribe, but suddenly realized that his interlocutor was only his little sister, tired and ill, whom, in addition, he loved more than anyone else in the world.

'You haven't changed, Silma, I think I'm talking to a simple girl, but in fact it's the daughter of Sulaiman the bookseller that I'm dealing with, may God add to your age what He subtracted from his. And may He shorten your tongue as He lengthened his.'

Blessing the memory of their father, they burst out in peals of frank laughter. They were now accomplices, as they had always been. Khali hitched up the front of his *jubba* and sat cross-legged on a woven straw mat at the entrance to his sister's bedroom.

'Your questions pierce me with their softness like the snow of Mount Cholair, which burns even more surely than the desert sun.'

Suddenly confident and a little mischievous, Salma asked him bluntly:

'And what do you say?'

With a gesture which was not at all spontaneous she lowered her head, seized the edge of her brother's *taylassan* and hid her red eyes within it. Then, her face still hidden, she pronounced, like the sentence of a qadi:

'Tell me everything!'

Khali's words were few:

'This city is protected by those who seek to despoil it, and governed by those who are its enemies. Soon, my sister, we shall have to take refuge beyond the sea.'

His voice cracked, and so as not to betray his emotion he tore himself away from Salma and disappeared.

Devastated, she did not attempt to detain him. She did not even notice that he had gone. No further noise, no sound of voices, no laughter, no clinking of glasses came to her from the patio; no shaft of light.

The feast had ended.

The Year of the Amulets

895 A.H.

25 November 1489 - 13 November 1490

That year, for the sake of a smile, my maternal uncle took the path of exile. It was thus that he explained his decision to me many years later, while our caravan was traversing the vast Sahara, south of Sijilmassa, during a fresh and peaceful night which was lulled rather than disturbed by the far-off howling of jackals. A slight breeze obliged Khali to tell his tale in a loud voice, and his tone was so reassuring that it made me breathe once more the odors of the Granada of my birth, and his prose was so bewitching that my camel seemed to move forwards in time with the rise and fall of its rhythms.

I would have wished to report each one of his words, but my memory is short and my eloquence feeble, so that many of the illuminations of his story will never, alas, appear in any book.

'The first day of that year, I went up early to the Alhambra, not, as I usually did, to start work in the small office of the *diwan* where I drafted the sultan's letters, but, in company with various notables of my family, to offer New Year greetings. The *majlis*, the sultan's court, which was being held on this occasion in the Hall of the Ambassadors, was thronged with turbaned qadis, dignitaries wearing high felt skull caps, colored red or green, and rich merchants with hair tinted with henna and separated, like my own, with a carefully drawn parting.

'After bowing before Boabdil, most of the guests withdrew to the Myrtle Court, where they wandered around the pool for some time dispensing their *salam alaikums*. The more senior notables sat on couches covered with carpets, backed against the walls of the immense room, edging their way forwards to get as close as possible to the sultan or his ministers to present them with some request, or simply to show their presence at court.

'As letter-writer and calligrapher at the state secretariat, as the traces of red ink on my fingers bore witness, I had some small privileges, including that of sauntering as I wished between the *majlis* and the pool, and to stroll about with those who seemed most interesting, then going back to sit down before finding a new prey. This was an excellent way of collecting news and opinions about matters of immediate concern, the more so as people could speak freely under Boabdil, while in the time of his father they would look around seven times before voicing the least criticism, which would be expressed in ambiguous terms, in verses and proverbs, which could easily be retracted if they were denounced later. The sense of feeling freer and less spied upon only made the people of Granada more severe towards the sultan, even when they found themselves under his roof, even when they were there to wish him long life, health and victories. Our people are merciless towards sovereigns who do not behave towards them as sovereigns.

'On this autumn day, the yellowing leaves were more securely attached to the trees than the notables of Granada to their monarch. The city was divided, as it had been for years, between the peace party and the war party, neither of which called upon the sultan.

'Those who wanted peace with Castile said: We are weak and the Rumis are strong; we have been abandoned by our brothers in Egypt and the Maghrib, while our enemies have the support of Rome and all the Christians; we have lost Gibraltar, Alhambra, Ronda, Marbella, Malaga, and so many other places, and as long as peace is not restored, the list will continue to increase; the orchards have been laid waste by the troops, and the peasants complain; the roads are no longer safe, the merchants cannot lay in their stocks, the *qaisariyya* and the *suqs* are empty, and the price of foodstuffs is rising, except that of meat, which is being sold at one dirham the pound, because thousands of animals have been slaughtered to prevent them being carried off by the enemy. Boabdil should do everything to silence the warmongers and reach a lasting peace with Castile, before Granada itself falls under siege.

'Those who wanted war said: The enemy has decided once and for all to annihilate us, and it is not by submitting that we will force them to withdraw. See how the people of Malaga have been forced into slavery after their surrender! See how the Inquisition has raised pyres for the Jews of Seville, of Saragossa, of Valencia, of Teruel, of Toledo! Tomorrow the pyres will be raised in Granada, not just for the people of the Sabbath but for the Muslims as well! How can we stop this, except by resistance, mobilization, and *jihad*? Each time we have fought with a will, we have managed to check the advance of the Castilians, but after our victories traitors appear among us, who seek only to conciliate the enemy of God, pay him tribute, and open the gates of our cities to him. Has Boabdil himself not promised one day to hand over Granada to Ferdinand? It is more than three years since he signed a document to that effect at Loja. This sultan is a traitor, he must be replaced by a true Muslim who is determined to wage the holy war and to restore confidence to our army.

'It would have been difficult to find a soldier, an officer, the commander of a platoon of ten, or of a hundred or of a thousand, still less a man of religion, a *qadi*, a lawyer, an *'alim* or the imam of a mosque who would not share the latter point of view, while the merchants and cultivators for the most part opted for peace. The court of Boabdil was itself divided. Left to himself, Boabdil would have made any truce at whatever price, because he was born a vassal and did not hope to do more than die as one; but he could not ignore the inclinations of his army, which regarded the heroic forays made by the other princes of the Nasrid House with ill-concealed impatience.

'A particularly telling example was always mentioned by the war party: that of Basta, a Muslim city to the east of Granada, encircled and bombarded by the Rumis for more than five months. The Christian kings -may the Most High demolish what they have built, and rebuild what they have demolished - had raised wooden towers which faced the outer walls and dug a ditch to prevent the inhabitants of the besieged city from communicating with the outside world. However, in spite of their overwhelming superiority in numbers and armaments, and in spite of the presence of Ferdinand himself, the Castilians were unable to prevail against the town, and the garrison was able to make bloody raids each night. Thus the relentless resistance of the defenders of Basta, commanded by the Nasrid amir Yahya al-Najjar, excited the passions of the people of Granada and inflamed their imagination.

'Boabdil was not particularly pleased at this, because Yahya, the hero of Basta, was one of his most bitter enemies. He even laid claim to the throne of Granada, which his grandfather had once occupied, and considered the present sultan a usurper.

'The very evening before New Year's Day, a new exploit of the defenders of Basta reached the ears of the people of Granada. The Castilians, it was said, had got wind of the fact that foodstuffs were beginning to be in short supply in Basta. To persuade them that the opposite was the case, Yahya had devised a form of deception: to collect together all the remaining provisions, to display them prominently in the stalls of the suq, and then invite a delegation of Christians to come and negotiate with him. Entering the city, Ferdinand's envoys were amazed to see such a wealth of all kinds of goods, and hastened to report the fact to their king, recommending that he should not continue to try to starve out the inhabitants of Basta, but instead to propose an honourable settlement to the city's defenders.

'Within a few hours, at least ten people joyfully told me the same story, at the hammam, at the mosque, and in the corridors of the Alhambra; each time, I pretended not to have heard the story before so as not to offend the speaker, to give him the pleasure of adding his own embellishment. I smiled too, but a little less each time, because anxiety gnawed at my breast. I kept asking myself why Yahya had allowed Ferdinand's envoys to enter the besieged city, and above all how he could have hoped to conceal from them the penury which gripped the city, if everyone in Granada, and probably elsewhere, knew the truth and was laughing at the deception.

'My worst fears,' my uncle continued, 'were realized on New Year's Day, in the course of my conversations with visitors to the Alhambra. I then learned that Yahya, Fighter for the Faith, Sword of Islam, had not only decided to hand Basta over to the infidels, but even to join the Castilian troops to open the way to the other towns of the kingdom, especially Guadix and Almeria, and finally Granada. The particular skill of this prince had been to distract the Muslims by means of his pretended stratagem, to conceal the real purpose of his negotiations with Ferdinand. He had taken his decision, some said, in exchange for a substantial sum of money, and the promise that his soldiers and the citizens of the town would be spared. But he had obtained even more than this; converting to Christianity himself, this amir of the royal family, this grandson of the sultan, was to become a high-ranking notable of Castile. I shall speak of him to you again.

'At the beginning of the year 895, it was clear that no one suspected that such a metamorphosis would be possible. But, from the first days of the month of Muharram, the most alarming news reached us. Basta fell, followed by Purcena, and then Guadix. All the eastern part of the kingdom, where the war party was strongest, fell into the hands of the Castilians without a blow being exchanged.

'The war party had lost its hero, and Boabdil had got rid of an inconvenient rival. However, the Castilians' victories had reduced his kingdom to very little, to Granada and its immediate surroundings, and this area was also subject to regular attacks. Was this a matter for rejoicing for the sultan, or lamentation?

'It is on such occasions,' said my uncle, 'that great-heartedness or small-mindedness reveals itself. And it was the latter that I perceived so clearly on the face of Boabdil on the first day of the year, in the Hall of the Ambassadors. I had just heard the cruel truth about Basta from a young Berber officer of the guard who had relatives in the besieged city. He often came to see me in the state secretariat, and he came to me because he did not dare to address the sultan directly, especially as the bearer of evil tidings. I led him straight to Boabdil, who commanded him to make his report to him in a low voice. Bending over towards the monarch's ear he stammered out the news he had received.

'But, while the officer was speaking, the sultan's face swelled into a broad, indecent and hideous smile. I can still see those fleshy lips opening in front of me, those hairy cheeks which seemed to stretch to his ears, those teeth, spaced wide apart to crunch up the victory, those eyes which closed slowly as if he was expecting the warm kiss of a lover, and that head which nodded with delight, backwards and forwards and forwards and backwards, as if he was listening to the most languorous of songs. As long as I live, I shall have the image of that smile before me, that terrible smile of pettiness and small-mindedness.'

Khali stopped. The night hid his face from me, but I heard him breathe deeply, sigh, and then murmur a number of prayers which I repeated after him. The yappings of the jackals seemed closer.

'Boabdil's attitude did not surprise me,' continued Khali, his equanimity restored. 'I was not unaware of the fickleness of the master of the Alhambra, nor of the feebleness of his character, nor even of his ambiguous relations with the Castilians. I knew that our princes were corrupt, that they were not concerned to defend the kingdom, and that exile would soon be the fate of our people. But I had to see with my own eyes the bared soul of the last sultan of Andalus in order to feel myself forced to react. God shows to whom He will the right path, and to others the way to perdition.'

My uncle stayed only another three months in Granada, time to turn various goods and property discreetly into gold, which would be easy to carry. Then, one moonless night, he left with his mother, his wife, his four daughters and a servant, accompanied by a horse and several mules, for Almeria, where he obtained permission from the Castilians to sail to Tlemcen with other refugees. But he intended to set himself up at Fez, and it was there that my parents and I met him again, after the fall of Granada.

If my mother mourned Khali's departure unceasingly all that year, my father Muhammad, may God keep his memory fragrant, did not think of following the example of his brother-in-law. There was no sense of despair in the city. Throughout the year there were particularly encouraging tales in circulation, frequently spread about, my mother told me, by the ineffable Sarah. 'Each time Gaudy Sarah visited me, I knew that I would be able to tell your father tales which would make him happy and self-assured for a whole week. In the end it was he who asked me impatiently whether the juljul had tinkled in our house in his absence.'

One day, Sarah arrived, her eyes full of news. Even before she could sit down, she began to tell her stories with a thousand gestures. She had just heard, from a cousin in Seville, that King Ferdinand had received two messengers from the sultan of Egypt, monks from Jerusalem, in circumstances of the greatest secrecy, who, it was said, had been charged with conveying a solemn warning to him from the master of Cairo: if the attacks against Granada did not cease, the anger of the Mamluke sultan would be terrible indeed!

In a few hours the news made the rounds of the city, being enlarged out of all proportion and being constantly embellished with fresh details, so much so that the next day, from the Alhambra to Mauror and from al-Baisin to the suburb of the Potters, anyone who dared to cast doubt on the imminent arrival of a massive body of Egyptian troops was regarded with great distrust and profound suspicion. Some were even declaring that a huge Muslim fleet had appeared off al-Rabita, south of Granada, and that the Turks and Maghribis had joined forces with the Egyptians. If this news was not true, people said to the remaining sceptics, how else could they explain that the Castilians had suddenly ceased their attacks against the kingdom some weeks ago, while Boabdil, so fearful only a short time ago, now launched raid after raid on the territory controlled by the Christians without incurring any reprisals? A curious intoxication seemed to have taken possession of the dying city.

I was at that stage a child at the breast, privy neither to the wisdom, nor to the folly of men, which meant that I did not participate in the general credulity. Very much later, when I was a man and proud to carry the name 'of Granada' to remind everyone of the noble and prestigious city from which I had been exiled, I found it difficult to stop myself reflecting on this blindness on the part of the people of my country, including my own parents, who had been able to persuade themselves of the imminent arrival of an army of salvation when only death, defeat and shame awaited them.

* * *

That year was also one of the most dangerous of all those that I would pass through. Not only because of the dangers hanging over my city and those nearest to me, but also because for all the sons of Adam the first year is the one in which illnesses are most deadly, in which so many disappear without leaving a trace of what they might have been or might have done. How many great kings, or inspired poets, or intrepid travellers have never been able to attain the destiny which seemed promised to them, because they were not able to come through this first difficult journey, so simple and yet so deadly! How many mothers do not dare to become attached to their children because they fear that one day they might find themselves embracing a shadow.

'Death,' says the poet, 'holds our life by two extremities:
Old age is no closer to death than infancy.'

It was always said at Granada that the most dangerous time in the life of a nursing baby is the period immediately after its weaning, towards the end of the first year. Deprived of their mother's milk, so many children did not manage to survive for long, and it was customary to sew into their clothes amulets made of jet, and charms, wrapped up in leather sachets, sometimes containing mysterious writings which were thought to protect the bearer against the evil eye and various illnesses. One particular charm, called 'wolfstone', was even supposed to tame wild animals if placed upon their heads. At a time when it was not uncommon to encounter wild lions in the region of Fez, I often regretted not having been able to lay my hands on such a stone, although I do not believe that I would have dared to get sufficiently close to these creatures to place the charm on their manes.

The pious considered these beliefs and practices contrary to religion, although their own children often carried amulets, because such men rarely managed to persuade their wives or mothers to listen to reason.

I cannot deny this in my own case. I have never been parted from the piece of jet which Sarah sold to Salma on the eve of my first birthday, which has cabbalistic signs traced upon it which I have never been able to decipher. I do not believe that this

amulet really has magical powers, but man is so vulnerable in the face of Destiny that he cannot help himself being attracted to objects which are shrouded in mystery.

Will God, Who has created me so weak, one day reprove me for my weakness?

The Year of Astaghfirullah

896 A.H.

14 November 1490 - 3 November 1491

Shaikh Astaghfirullah had a wide turban, narrow shoulders and the grating voice of the preachers of the Great Mosque. That year, his dense reddish beard, the entire extent of the baggage which he carried with him into exile, turned gray, giving his bony face the appearance of perpetual anger. He would never again color his hair with henna. He had decided on this in a moment of lassitude, and woe to anyone who asked him why: 'When your Creator asks you what you were doing during the siege of Granada, will you dare to tell Him that you were prettifying yourself?'

Every morning, at the time of the call to prayer, he climbed to the roof of his house, one of the highest in the city, not to call the believers to prayer as he had done for several years, but to inspect, from afar, the object of his righteous anger.

'Don't you see,' he cried out to his sleeping neighbors, 'that it's your own tomb that is being built down there, on the road to Loja, and you go on sleeping here waiting for someone to come along and bury you! Come and see, if it is God's will that your eyes be opened. Come and see the walls which have been raised up in a single day by the might of Iblis the Evil One!'

With his hand stretched westwards, he pointed with his tapered fingers to the citadel of Santa Fe which the Catholic kings had begun to build in the spring and which had already taken on the appearance of a city.

In this country, where men had long adopted the odious practice of going into the street with their heads bare, or just covering themselves with a simple scarf thrown carelessly over their hair, which slid slowly onto their shoulders in the course of the day, everyone could distinguish the mushroom-shaped silhouette of Shaikh Astaghfirullah from far away. But few of the men of Granada knew his real name. It was said that his own mother had been the first to bestow this sobriquet upon him, because of the horrified cries which he used to utter from earliest childhood whenever anyone mentioned in front of him an object or an action which he considered improper: '*Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah!* I implore the pardon of God!' he would cry at the mere mention of wine, murder, or women's clothing.

There was a time when people teased him, gently or savagely. My father confessed to me that long before I was born he would often gather together with a group of friends on Fridays, just before the solemn midday prayer, in a little bookshop not far from the Great Mosque, to take bets. How many times would the shaikh utter his favorite phrase in the course of his sermon? The figure ranged

between fifteen and seventy-five, and throughout the ceremony one of the young conspirators would carefully keep count, exchanging amused winks with the others.

'But, at the time of the siege of Granada no one poked fun at *Astaghfirullah*,' continued my father, thoughtful and disturbed at the memory of his former pranks. 'In the eyes of the great mass of the people, the shaikh came to be regarded as a respected personality. Age had not caused him to abandon the words and the bearing for which he was famous; rather, on the contrary, the characteristics we used to laugh at had become accentuated. But the soul of our city had altered.

'You must understand, Hasan my son, that this man had spent his life warning people that if they continued to live as they did, the Most High would punish them both in this world and in the next. He had used Misfortune to arouse them as a beater arouses game. I still remember one of his sermons which began along these lines:

' "On my way to the mosque this morning, through the Sand Gate and the suq of the clothes dealers, I passed four taverns, *Astaghfirullah!*, where Malaga wine is sold with only the merest attempt at concealment, *Astaghfirullah!* and other forbidden beverages whose names I do not wish to know." '

In a grating and heavily affected voice, my father began to imitate the preacher, embroidering his sentences with countless *Astaghfirullah!*, mostly pronounced so quickly as to be almost incomprehensible, apart from a few which were probably the only authentic ones. This exaggeration apart the words seemed to me as if they were fairly close to the original.

'"Have not those who patronize these infamous haunts learned, from their earliest childhood, that God has cursed those who sell wine and those who buy it? That He has cursed the drinker and he who gives him to drink? They know, but they have forgotten, or otherwise they prefer drink which turns man into a rampaging animal to the Word which promises him Paradise. One of these taverns is owned by a Jewess, but the three others are owned, *Astaghfirullah!* by Muslims. And in addition, their clients are not Jews or Christians, as I know full well! Some of them are perhaps among us this Friday, humbly inclining their heads before their Creator, while only last night they were prostrate in their cups, slumped in the arms of a prostitute, or even, when their brains were clouded and their tongues unbridled, cursing Him Who has forbidden wine, Him Who has said, 'Do not come to the prayer in a state of drunkenness!' *Astaghfirullah!*" '

My father Muhammad cleared his throat, which was irritated by the shrill tone he had put on, before continuing:

' "Yes, my brother believers, these things have come to pass in your city, before your eyes, and you do not react, as if God was not awaiting you on the Day of Judgement to call you to account. As if God will continue to support you against your enemies when you scoff at His Word and that of His Messenger, may God grant him his prayers and his salvation! When, in the swarming streets of your city, your women

wander abroad unveiled, offering their faces and their hair to the lustful gaze of hundreds of men who are not all, I dare say, their husbands, fathers, sons or brothers. Why should God preserve Granada from the dangers which threaten it, when the inhabitants of the city have brought back the practices of the age of ignorance, the customs of pre-Islamic times, such as wailing at funerals, pride in one's race, the practice of divination, belief in omens and the efficacy of relics, and the use of epithets and sobriquets against which the Most High has most clearly given warning."

My father gave me a knowing look, but without interrupting the sermon, without even pausing for breath:

' "When, in contravention of the most stringent prohibitions, you bring into your own houses marble statues and ivory figurines, reproducing the male and female and animal form in a sacrilegious fashion, as if the Creator had need of the assistance of His creatures to perfect His Creation: when pernicious and impious doubt creeps into your spirits and those of your sons, doubt which separates you from the Creator, from His Book, from His Messenger and the Community of the Believers, doubt which shatters the walls and the very foundations of Granada?" '

As my father continued, his tone became noticeably less mocking, his movements less exaggerated and wild, his *astaghfirullahs* less frequent:

"When you spend for your own pleasure without shame and moderation sums which would have assuaged the hunger of a thousand poor men, and brought a smile to the cheeks of a thousand orphans? When you behave as if the houses and the lands you enjoy were yours, while all ownership belongs to the Most High, to Him alone, comes from Him and returns to Him at the time that He ordains, just as we return to Him ourselves, bearing no other treasure than our shrouds and our good deeds? Riches, my brother believers, consist not in the things which one possesses but in the things one can do without. Fear God! Fear God! Fear Him when you are old, but also when you are young! Fear Him when you are weak, but also when you are strong! Indeed you should fear Him even more when you are strong, because God will be the more merciless, and you must know that His eye passes as well through the imposing facade of a palace as through the clay wall of a hovel. And what does His eye encounter within the walls of palaces?" '

At this point, my father's tone was no longer that of a mimic, but that of a teacher in a Qur'anic school: his words flowed without artifice, and his eyes were fixed towards a point somewhere in the distance, like those of a sleepwalker:

"When the eye of the Most High passes through the thick walls of palaces, he sees that women singers are listened to more attentively than the doctors of the law, that the sound of the lute prevents men from hearing the call to prayer, that men cannot be distinguished from women, neither in their dress nor in their gait, and that the money extorted from the faithful is thrown at the feet of dancing girls. Brothers! Just as with

the fish that is caught, it is the head which begins to rot first, it is the same in human societies, where rottenness spreads from the top to the bottom."

A long silence followed, and when I wanted to ask a question, my father interrupted me with a gesture. I waited until he had completely returned from his memories and had begun to speak to me again:

'These words which I have repeated to you, Hasan, were parts of the shaikh's sermon delivered a few months before the fall of Granada. Whether I agree with his words or not, I am still shaken by them, even when I recall them ten years later. You can imagine, then, the effect which his sermons produced on the hard-pressed city of Granada in the year 896.

At the same time as they realized that the end was near, and that the evils which Astaghfirullah had always predicted were beginning to rain down upon them, the citizens of Granada became persuaded that the shaikh had been correct all along, and that it was heaven that had always spoken through his voice. Even in the poorest quarters, no woman's face was thenceforth seen in the streets. Some, even little girls who had hardly reached puberty, covered themselves through the fear of God, but others through the fear of men, because groups of youngsters were formed, armed with clubs to call the people to do good and to distance themselves from evil. Not a single tavern dared open its doors, even on the sly. The prostitutes left the city en masse and took themselves off to the camp of the besiegers, where the soldiers made them very welcome. The librarians hid from view those works which cast doubt on dogma and traditions, those collections of poems where wine and pleasure were celebrated, and treatises of astrology or geomancy. One day some books were even seized and burnt in the courtyard of the Great Mosque. I was walking past there by chance, when the pyre was beginning to go out, and the passers-by were dispersing with the smoke. A piece of paper flying in the wind revealed that the pile contained the works of a doctor poet of time gone by, known as al-Kalandar. On this paper, half consumed by the flames, I could just read these words:

That which is the best in my life, I draw from drunkenness.
Wine runs in my veins like blood

* * *

The books burnt in public that day, my father explained to me, belonged to another doctor, one of the most relentless adversaries of Astaghfirullah. He was called Abu Amr, but the friends of the shaikh changed his name to Abu Khamr, 'Father of Wine'.

The preacher and the doctor had only one thing in common, the habit of speaking frankly, and it was exactly this trait which stirred up the disputes whose unfolding was followed so avidly by the citizens of Granada. Apart from this, it seemed that the Most High had amused himself by creating two beings as unlike one another as possible.

Astaghfirullah was the son of a Christian convert, and it was undoubtedly this which explained his zeal, while Abu Khamr was the son and grandson of qadis, which meant that he did not find it necessary to give continual proof of his attachment to dogma and tradition. The shaikh was fair, lean and choleric, while the doctor was as brown as a ripe date, fatter than a sheep on the eve of the 'Id, and an ironical and contented smile rarely left his lips.

He had studied medicine from the old books, from the works of Hippocrates, Galen, Averroes, Avicenna, Abu'l-Qassis, Abenzoar and Maimonides, as well as more recent texts on leprosy and the plague, may God distance both of them from us.ⁱ Every day he would distribute freely to both rich and poor dozens of bottles of theriac which he had prepared himself. But this was simply to check the effect of viper's flesh or of the electuary, because he was far more interested in scientific experiments than in medical practice. Besides, how could he have been able, with hands which alcohol made constantly tremble, to operate upon an eye afflicted with a cataract, or even stitch up a wound? And would he have been able to prescribe diets - 'diet is the beginning of all treatment', the Prophet has said - or to advise patients not to gorge themselves upon food and drink, when he devoted himself without restraint to all the pleasures of the table. At the very most he could recommend old wine to assuage the sicknesses of the liver, as other doctors had done before him. If he was called 'tabib', it was because of all the scientific disciplines which interested him, which ranged from astronomy to botany by way of alchemy and algebra. Medicine was the one in which he was least confined to the role of a mere dabbler. But he never took a single dirham from it, because that was not how he earned his living. He owned about a dozen villages in the rich Vega of Granada, not far from the lands of the sultan, surrounded by fields of wheat and barley, olive groves and above all by fine orchards. His harvest of wheat, pears, citrons, oranges, bananas, saffron and sugar cane brought him, it was said, three thousand gold diners each season, more than a doctor would earn in thirty years. In addition, he owned an immense villa on the same hill as the Alhambra, a marvelous *carmen* surrounded by vines.

When Astaghfirullah held up the rich to public obloquy, he was often alluding to Abu Khamr, and it was the picture of the pot-bellied doctor dressed in silk that the poor people would call to mind. Because even those who benefited from his generosity without giving him a penny sensed a certain unease in his presence, either because some of his activities seemed to relate to magic, or because of the language of his discourse, so embroidered with learned words that it was often incomprehensible, except to a little group of learned idlers who spent their days and nights drinking with him and discussing mithridate, the astrolabe and metempsychosis. Princes of the royal family were often to be found among them, and Boabdil himself occasionally frequented their sessions, at least until the atmosphere created in the city by Astaghfirullah obliged the sultan to be more circumspect in his choice of companions.

'They were men of science and recklessness,' recalled my father. 'They often said sensible things when they were not in their cups, but in a way which exasperated ordinary people, because of its obscurity as much as its ungodliness. When a man is rich, whether in gold or in knowledge, he must treat the poverty of others with consideration.'

Then, in a confiding tone:

'Your maternal grandfather, Sulaiman the bookseller, may God have mercy upon him, occasionally went with these people. It was not of course for their wine, but for their conversation. And indeed the doctor was his best customer. He used to order rare books for him from Cairo, Baghdad or Isfahan, and sometimes even from Rome, Venice or Barcelona. Besides Abu Khamr used to complain that the Muslim lands produced fewer books than they used to, and that they were mostly repetitions or summaries of older books. On that your grandfather always agreed. In the first centuries of Islam, he would say bitterly, one could hardly count the treatises on philosophy, mathematics, medicine or astronomy. The poets themselves were far more numerous and innovative, both in style and in content.

'In Andalus too intellectual activity was flourishing, and its fruits were the books which were patiently copied and circulated among learned men from China to the far West. And then came the drying up of the spirit and of the pen. To defend themselves against the ideas and customs of the Franks, men turned Tradition into a citadel in which they shut themselves up. Granada could only produce imitators without talent or boldness.

'Abu Khamr lamented this, but Astaghfirullah accepted it. For him, searching for new ideas at all costs was simply a vice. What was important was to follow the teachings of the Most High as they had been understood and commented upon by the ancients. "Who dares to pretend that he is closer to the Truth than the Prophet and his companions? It is because they have stepped aside from the path of righteousness and because they have allowed morals and ideas to become corrupt that the Muslims have become weak in the face of their enemies." For the doctor, on the other hand, the lessons of History were quite otherwise. "The greatest epoch of Islam," he would say, "was when the caliphs would distribute their gold to wise men and translators, and would spend their evenings discussing philosophy and medicine in the company of half-drunk poets. And did not Andalusia flourish in the days when the vizier al-Rahman used to say jokingly: 'O you who cry "Hasten to the prayer!" ? You would do better to cry: "Hasten to the bottle!" ' The Muslims only became weak when silence, fear and conformity darkened their spirits." '

It seemed to me that my father had closely followed all these discussions, but without ever having made a definite judgement upon them. Ten years later, his words were still uncertain.

'Few people followed the doctor's godless ways, but some of his ideas swayed them. As witness the business of the cannon. Did I ever tell you about it?

'This happened towards the end of the year 896. All the roads leading to the Vega were in the hands of the Castilians, and supplies were becoming scarce. In Granada the hours of daylight were marked only by the whistling of bullets and fragments of rock raining down on the houses, and by the lamentations of weeping women; in the public gardens, hundreds of destitute people in rags, impoverished at the beginning of a winter which promised to be long and hard, fought over the last branches of the last withered tree; the shaikh's followers, unleashed and distraught, roamed the streets looking for some mischief-maker to punish.

'Around the besieged city, the fighting was less intense, even less violent. The horsemen and foot soldiers of Granada, decimated by the Castilian artillery each time they sallied forth, no longer dared to venture in a body far from the ramparts. They were content with small operations at night, ambushing an enemy squadron, stealing some arms or rustling some cattle, bold but essentially pointless acts, because they were not sufficient to loosen the noose, nor provision the city, nor even to put new heart into it.

'Suddenly, there was a rumor. Not one of those which scattered like fine rain from a thick cloud, but one which poured down like a summer shower, covering the misery of daily noises with its deafening tumult. A rumor which brought to our city that element of absurdity from which no drama can escape.

' "Abu Khamr has just got hold of a cannon, seized from the enemy by a handful of reckless soldiers who agreed to drag it to his garden for ten gold pieces!" '

My father drew a cup of orgeat syrup to his lips and swallowed several mouthfuls slowly before continuing his story, unaware of my total incomprehension:

'The citizens of Granada had never possessed a cannon, and, as Astaghfirullah never ceased to repeat to them that this devilish invention made more noise than it did harm, they were resigned to the notion that only the enemy could have such a new and complicated piece of apparatus. Hence the doctor's initiative plunged them into considerable confusion. A continual procession of young and old filed past "the thing", keeping a respectful distance from it and remarking in subdued voices about its well-rounded contours and its menacing jaw. As for Abu Khamr, he was there, with his own roundness, savoring his revenge. "Tell the shaikh to come here rather than passing his days in prayer! Ask him if he knows how to light a fuse as well as he knows how to burn books!" The more pious distanced themselves immediately, murmuring some oath or other under their breath, while the others persistently questioned the doctor about how the cannon worked, and the effects it would have if it was used against Santa Fe. Of course he himself had no idea, and his explanations were all the more impressive.

'As you will have guessed, Hasan my son, this cannon was never used. Abu Khamr had neither bullets nor gunpowder nor artillery men, and some of his visitors began to snigger. Happily for him, the *muhtasib*, who was responsible for public order, alerted by the crowds, organized a gang of men to take the object away and drag it to the Alhambra to show it to the sultan. No one ever saw it again. But we continued to hear about it long afterwards, from the doctor himself, naturally enough, who never ceased to say that it was only with the aid of cannons that the Muslims could defeat their enemies, and that as long as they did not agree either to acquire or to make a great number of these machines, their kingdoms would be in danger. For his part Astaghfirullah preached exactly the opposite: it was through the martyrdom of the soldiers of the faith that the besiegers would be overcome.

'The sultan Boabdil eventually brought them into accord, since he desired neither cannons nor martyrdom. While the shaikh and the doctor quibbled endlessly, and the whole of Granada around them pondered its fate, the master of the city could only think of how to avoid confrontation. He sent message after message to King Ferdinand, in which the only question was that of the date of the surrender of the city, the besieger talking in terms of weeks and the besieged in terms of months, hoping perhaps that the hand of the Most High would wipe out the feeble arrangements of men by some sudden decree, a storm, a cataclysm or a plague, which would decimate the grandees of Spain.'

But Heaven had other destinies for us.

The Year of the Fall

897 A.H.

4 November 1491 - 22 October 1492

'It was cold that year in Granada, fearfully cold, and the snow was black with freshly dug earth and blood. O, the familiarity of death ! The imminence of exile ! How the joys of the past were painful to remember!'

A great change came over my mother whenever she used to speak of the fall of our city; for this drama she assumed a particular tone of voice, a look, words, tears, which I never knew in any other circumstances. I myself was less than three years old in those tumultuous days, and I do not know whether the cries that came to my ears at that moment were the memory of what I had actually heard at the time or simply the echo of the thousands of accounts of the story that I had heard since.

These tales did not always begin in the same way. Those of my mother spoke first of hunger and anguish.

'From the very beginning of the year,' she used to say, 'the snows had come to cut off the few roads which the besiegers had spared, making Granada completely isolated from the rest of the country, particularly the Vega and the Alpujarras Mountains in the south, whence wheat, oats, millet, oil and raisins still used to reach us. People in our neighborhood were afraid, even the least poor of them. Every day they bought anything they could lay their hands on, and instead of being reassured at the sight of the earthenware jars of provisions stacked up along the walls of their rooms they became even more afraid of famine, rats and looters. Everyone said that if the roads opened up again they would leave immediately for some village or other where they had relatives. In the first months of the siege it had been the inhabitants of the surrounding villages who sought asylum in Granada, meeting up with the refugees from Guadix and Gibraltar. They accommodated themselves as best they could with their relatives, in the outbuildings of mosques or in deserted houses. During the previous summer they were even living in gardens and on waste ground, under makeshift tents. The streets were choked with beggars of all descriptions, sometimes grouped in whole families, father, mother, children and old people, all haggard and skeletal, but also often gathered in gangs of youngsters of menacing appearance; and men of honor who could not bear either to throw themselves upon charity or into a life of crime were dying slowly in their homes, away from prying eyes.'

This was not to be the fate of my family. Even in the worst moments of penury, our house never lacked for anything, thanks to my father's position. He had inherited an important municipal function from his own father, that of chief public weigh-master, in charge of the weighing of grains and the regulation of proper commercial practice. It was this function which entitled members of my family to the name of al-Wazzan, the weigh-master, which I still bear. In the Maghrib, no one knows that I now call myself Leo or John-Leo de Medici, no one has ever addressed me as the African. There I was Hasan, son of Muhammad al-Wazzan, and in official documents the name 'al-Zayyati' was added, the name of my tribe of origin, 'al-Gharnati', the Granadan. And if I was far off from Fez I would be called 'alFassi' referring to my first country of adoption, which was not to be the last.

As weigh-master, my father could have taken as much as he wished from the foodstuffs submitted to him for inspection, provided he did not do this to excess, or even receive payment in gold dinars as the price of his silence on the frauds perpetrated by the merchants. I do not believe that he thought to enrich himself, but his function meant that the spectre of famine was always distant for him and his family.

'You were such a chubby little boy,' my mother used to tell me, 'that I did not dare to take you for walks in the streets in case you attracted the evil eye'. It was also important not to reveal our relative affluence.

Concerned not to alienate those of his neighbors who were in more straitened circumstances, my father would often offer them some of his acquisitions,

particularly meat or spring produce, but he always gave within limits and with modesty, because any largesse might have been provocative, any condescension humiliating. And when the people of the capital had no strength or illusions left, and showed their anger and helplessness in the streets, and when a delegation was to be sent to the sultan to charge him to put an end to the war at all costs, my father agreed to join the representatives of al-Baisin.

Thus, when he would retell the tale of the fall of Granada, his account would always begin in the tapestried rooms of the Alhambra.

'There were thirty of us, from all the corners of the city, from Najd to the Fountain of Tears, from the Potters' Quarter to the Almond Field, and those who were shouting loudly did not tremble any less than the others. I will not pretend to you that I was not terrified, and I would have certainly gone back if I had not feared to lose face. But imagine the folly of what we did; for two whole days thousands of townspeople had sown disorder in the streets, yelling the worst curses against the sultan, abusing his counselors and making ironic remarks about his wives, beseeching him either to fight or make peace rather than prolong a situation indefinitely in which there was no joy in living and no glory in dying. So, as if to bring directly to his ears the insults which his spies had certainly already reported to him, we, a group of strange, disheveled and vociferous parliamentarians, were coming to defy him in his own palace, before his chamberlain, his ministers and the officers of his guard. And there I was, an official from the *muhtasib*'s office, charged with maintaining respect for the law and public order, in the company of the ring-leaders of the riots, while the enemy stood at the very gates of the city. Thinking of all this in my confusion, I told myself that I would find myself inside a dungeon, beaten with a bull's pizzle until the blood came, or even crucified on one of the crenellations in the city walls.

'My fears turned out to be groundless, and shame soon replaced fright. Fortunately, none of my companions was aware of either the one or the other. You will soon understand Hasan my son, why I have told you about this moment of weakness, which I have never spoken of before to any member of my family. I want you to know what really took place in our city of Granada during that calamitous year; perhaps this may prevent you allowing yourself to be misused by those who have the destiny of multitudes in their hands. For my part, everything of value that I have learned about life has been revealed to me while unveiling the hearts of princes and women.

'Our delegation passed into the Hall of the Ambassadors, where Boabdil was enthroned in his usual place, surrounded by two armed soldiers and several advisers. He had astonishingly deep wrinkles for a man of thirty, his beard flecked with grey his eyelids withered; an enormous carved copper brazier standing in front of him concealed his legs and chest from our sight. It was the end of Muharram, which corresponded that year with the beginning of the Christian month of December, and it was so cold at the time that one recalled the arrogant words of the poet Ibn Sara de Santarem when he visited Granada:

People of this land,
do not pray, Do not turn away from that which is forbidden.
Thus you will win your place in Hell
Where the fire is so comforting
When the North Wind blows.

'The sultan welcomed us with a smile hovering on his lips, which seemed to me to be benevolent. He motioned us to sit down, which I did very gingerly. But, before the discussion could even begin, I saw pass by, to my great surprise, a large number of dignitaries, officers, *ulama*, notables from almost everywhere, including shaikh Astaghfirullah, the vizier al-Mulih, doctor Abu Khamr, almost a hundred people, some of whom had always avoided one another.

'Boabdil spoke slowly, in a low voice which forced his visitors to be quiet and strain their ears in his direction, barely able to breathe. "In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, I have commanded that all those with an opinion on the disturbing situation in which fate has placed our city should meet here in the Alhambra Palace. Put forward your opinions and make up your minds on the course of action which should be adopted for the good of all, and I undertake to act according to your advice. Our vizier al-Mulih will give his opinion first; I shall not speak until the end." Upon which he leaned his back on the cushions arranged along the wall and did not say another word.

'Al-Mulih was the sultan's principal confidant, and it was expected that he would deliver some words of praise in rhyming prose of the stand taken by his master. He did nothing of the kind. Although he addressed his speech to the "glorious descendant of the glorious Nasrid dynasty" he continued in very different tones: "My Lord, will you guarantee me immunity from punishment, *aman*, if I say to you fully and frankly what I think at this moment?" Boabdil indicated his assent with a slight movement of his head. "My opinion," continued the vizier, "is that the policy we are pursuing serves neither God nor those who worship Him. We can hold forth here for ten days and ten nights, but this will not put a single grain of rice into the empty bowls of the children of Granada. Let us look the truth in the face, even if it is hideous, and let us scorn untruth, even if it is decked out in jewels. Our city is large, and even in time of peace it is not easy to provision it with the supplies that it needs. Every day which passes takes its toll of victims, and one day the Most High will call us to account for all those innocents whom we have allowed to perish. We could demand sacrifices of the inhabitants of the city if we could promise them a swift deliverance, if a powerful Muslim army was on its way to liberate Granada and punish its besiegers, but, as we now know, no one is coming to succour us. You, Lord of this kingdom, have written to the Sultan of Cairo, and to the Ottoman sultan; have they replied to you?" Boabdil raised his eyebrows to indicate that they had not. "And more recently, have you not written to the Muslim rulers of Fez and Tlemcen asking them to hasten here with their armies? What has been their reaction? Your noble blood, O Boabdil, forbids you to speak, but I will do so in your place. In fact, the rulers of Fez and Tlemcen have sent

messengers laden with gifts, not to us but to Ferdinand, swearing that they will never take up arms against him! Today Granada is alone, because the other cities of the kingdom are already lost and because the Muslims of other lands are deaf to our appeals. What solution remains open to us?"

'A weary silence came over the assembly, which contented itself with occasional rumblings of approval. Al-Mulih opened his mouth as if about to continue his argument. But he said nothing, stepped backwards and sat down, his face fixed on the ground. Three speakers of no particular distinction then got up in turn to say that the surrender of the town should be negotiated immediately, and that those in charge had lost too much time, and had been insensitive to the sufferings of the ordinary people.

'It was now the turn of Astaghfirullah, who had been sitting impatiently in his seat since the meeting began. He got up, made a mechanical movement with both hands to adjust his turban, and directed his gaze towards the ceiling, which was decorated with arabesques. "The vizier al-Mulih is a man well known for his intelligence and his skill, and when he wishes to implant an idea in the minds of his audience, he can manage it with ease. He wants to give us a message, and he has prepared our minds to receive it and now he is silent, because he does not wish to give us with his own hands the bitter cup from which he wishes us to drink. What is there in this cup? If he does not want to tell us from his own mouth, I will do it myself. The vizier wants us to agree to hand over Granada to Ferdinand. He has told us that all further resistance is useless, that no help will reach us from Andalus or elsewhere; he has revealed to us that the envoys of the Muslim princes have compromised themselves with our enemies, may God punish them and the others as He alone knows how! But al-Mulih has not told us everything! He has not said that he has himself been negotiating with the Rumis for weeks. He has not confessed that he has already agreed to open the gates of Granada to them."

'Astaghfirullah raised his voice to speak above the mounting uproar. "Al-Mulih has not told us that he has even agreed to bring forward the date of the surrender, that this will take place within the next few days, and that he has only sought a delay to prepare the minds of the people of Granada for defeat. It is to force us to capitulate that the food warehouses have been closed for several days. It is to deepen our discouragement that the demonstrations in the streets have been organized by the vizier's agents; and if we have been invited to come to the Alhambra today, it is not to criticize the actions of our governors, as the vizier would have us believe, but to give our backing to their impious decision to surrender Granada." The shaikh was almost shouting; his beard shook with rage and bitter sarcasm. "Do not be indignant, my brother believers, because if al-Mulih has concealed the truth from us it is certainly not because he wished to deceive us; it is only because he lacked the time. But, by God, let us interrupt him no more, let him tell us in detail what he has been doing these past few days, and then we can agree on the course of action to be followed." He finished abruptly and sat down, gathering the hem of his stained gown with a trembling hand, while a deathly silence came over the room, and all eyes turned towards al-Mulih.

'The latter expected that one of the others present would intervene; in vain. Then he rose up with a burst of energy. "The shaikh is a man of piety and courage, as we all know; his love for this city is the more meritorious since he was not born here, and his zeal for Islam is the more praiseworthy since it was not the religion into which he was born. Furthermore he is a man of vast knowledge, well versed in the sciences of religion and of the world, and does not hesitate to seek knowledge at its source, however far away that may be. Listening to him relate what has passed between myself, the envoy of the mighty sultan of Andalus, and the emissary of King Ferdinand, I cannot conceal my admiration, astonishment and surprise, since it was not I who have told him these things. Moreover, I must acknowledge that what he has said is not far from the truth. I would reproach him only in so far as he has presented the situation in the way that our enemies describe it. For them, what is important is the date of the peace treaty, since the siege costs them dear. For us, the point is not to delay the inevitable for a few days or even a few weeks, after which the Castilians would throw themselves upon us with even greater fury. Given that victory is out of the question, by an irrevocable decree of He who orders all things, we must try to obtain the best possible terms. That is to say, a safe conduct for ourselves, our wives and our children; the preservation of our properties, our fields, our houses and our animals; the right of every one of us to continue to live in Granada, according to the religion of God and of His prophet, praying in our mosques and paying no other taxes than the *zakat* and the tithe, as prescribed by our Law; equally, the right for those who wish to do so to depart across the sea towards the Maghrib, taking all their property with them, with a period of three years to choose, and with the right to sell their possessions at a just price to Muslims or to Christians. Those are the terms on which I have been attempting to obtain Ferdinand's agreement, making him swear on the Gospel that he would respect it until his death and that his successors would respect it after him. Was I wrong to do so?"

'Without waiting to hear their replies, al-Mulih continued: "Dignitaries and notables of Granada, I do not bring you news of victory, but I wish to save you from the bitter cup of humiliating defeat, from massacre, the violation of women and young girls, from dishonor, slavery, pillage and destruction. For this I need your agreement and your support. If you ask me to do so, I can break off the negotiations, or make them last longer; that is what I would do if I sought only the praise of fools and hypocrites. I could give Ferdinand's envoys a thousand excuses for delaying the peace treaty. But would this really be in the interests of Muslims? Now it is winter; the enemy's forces are more scattered, and the snow has forced him to reduce his attacks. He shelters behind the walls of Santa Fe and the fortifications he has constructed, satisfied with preventing us from using the roads. In three months, it will be spring, Ferdinand will have fresh troops, ready to launch the decisive attack against our city which hunger will have rendered almost lifeless. It is now that we must negotiate! It is now that Ferdinand will accept our conditions, while we can still offer him something in return."

'Abu Khamr who had remained silent since the beginning of the discussion, leaped up suddenly from his place, jostling his neighbors with his massive shoulders: "We can offer him something, you say, but what? Why do the words stick in your throat? What you want to offer to Ferdinand is not a golden candlestick, nor a robe of honor, nor a fifteen-year-old slave girl. That which you wish to present to Ferdinand is this city, about which the poet has written:

Granada, no city is your equal,
Not in Egypt, not in Syria, not in Iraq,
You are the bride
And these lands are only your dowry.

' "What you want to offer to Ferdinand, O Vizier, is this palace of the Alhambra, glory of glories and marvel of marvels. Look around you, my brothers! Let your eyes wander slowly around this room, every section of whose walls has been patiently carved by our fathers and grandfathers like a rare and delicate jewel! May it remain for ever in your memories, this holy place where none of you will ever set foot again, except perhaps as a slave."

'The doctor was weeping, and many men hid their faces. "For eight centuries," he continued in a broken and breathless voice, "we have illuminated this earth with our knowledge, but our sun is at its eclipse, and everything is becoming dark. And as for you, O Granada, I know that your flame will flicker a last time before being extinguished, but do not count on me to blow it out, as my descendants would spit upon my memory until the Day of Judgement." He collapsed rather than sat down, and several seconds passed, slowly, heavily, before the silence was broken, once more by Astaghfirullah, who forgot, for once, his enmity towards Abu Khamr. "What the doctor says is true. That which the vizier is offering to the king of the Infidels is our town, with its mosques which will become churches, its schools where the Qur'an will never penetrate again, its houses where no prohibition will be respected. What he is also offering to Ferdinand is the right of life and death over us and ours, because we know very well how much faith we can place in the treaties and oaths of Rum. Did they not promise respect and safe-conduct for the inhabitants of Malaga four years ago, before entering the city and leading the women and children into captivity? Can you assure me, al-Mulih, that it will not be the same at Granada?"

'The vizier replied in exasperation: "I can assure you of nothing, except that I shall remain in this city myself, that I shall share the fate of its sons and I shall use all the energy that the Most High will see fit to give me to make sure that the agreements are respected. It is not in the hands of Ferdinand that our destiny lies, but in the hands of God, and it is He alone who can one day give us the victory that He has not vouchsafed to us today. For the time being, you know what the situation is, and it is pointless to prolong this discussion. We must come to a decision. Those who approve the conclusion of an agreement with the Castilians should pronounce the motto of the Nasrid dynasty!"

'From all the corners of the Hall of the Ambassadors,' my father recalled, 'came the same words, "Only God can grant the victory," said with determination but with no joy, because that which had but a short while ago been a war cry had become, that year, a formula of resignation; perhaps even also, in the mouths of some, a reproach addressed to the Creator, may He preserve us from doubt and unbelief!

'When it was clear that he had the support of the majority of those present, Boabdil decided to take over from the vizier. He quietened his subjects with an imperious gesture of his hands, to say in a sententious tone: "The believers have agreed among themselves, and their decision has been made. We will follow the way of peace, sure in the knowledge that God will guide us towards that which is best for us. It is He who listens, He who replies."

Before the sultan had finished his sentence, Astaghfirullah strode towards the door, his anger making his limp more pronounced, his lips uttering the terrible words: "Was it of us that God has said in His Book: You are the best nation that has ever been given to mankind?"

* * *

The very evening of the meeting in the Alhambra all Granada knew exactly what had been said there. Then began the harsh ordeal of waiting, with its daily batch of rumors, always centering on one despairingly unique theme: the day and the hour of the entry of the Castilians into the city.

'During the last week of the month of Safar,' my mother told me, 'the day after the feast of the birth of 'Issa the Messiah - peace upon him - Gaudy Sarah came to see me with a little book carefully wrapped up in a mauve silk scarf which she took gingerly from the bottom of her wicker basket. "Neither you nor I can read," I said to her, forcing a smile, but she seemed to have lost all her gaiety. "I brought this to show to your cousin," she said in the oldest voice. "It is a treatise written by one of the wise men of our community, Rabbi Ishaq Ben Yahuda. He says that a flood is about to pour down upon us, a flood of blood and fire, a chastisement which will afflict all those who have abandoned the life of nature for the corruption of the city." Her delivery was halting and her hands trembled.

'You were sitting on my knees, my son; I held you very close and kissed you warmly on the neck. "Foreteller of evil tidings!" I snapped at Sarah, more from irritation than malice. "Are our daily sufferings not overwhelming enough? Do you really need to prophesy an even worse fate for us?" But the Jewess would not be distracted from her theme. "Rabbi Ishaq is a regular visitor to King Ferdinand, he knows many secrets, and if he uses the language of the prophets it is to make us understand things which he would not otherwise be able to divulge. Perhaps he is trying to warn you that Granada will be taken, but that is no longer a secret. His words go farther than that. He maintains that, for the Jews, there will be no more air to breathe or water to drink in this land of Safarad."

'Normally so exuberant, she was now so distressed that she could only speak with great difficulty. "Is it your book that has so upset you? There is something else. I heard this morning that one of my nephews was burnt alive at the stake at La Guardia, near Toledo, with ten other people. They were accused of having practiced black magic, of having kidnapped a Christian child and crucified him like 'Issa. The inquisitors could not prove anything. They could not give the name of the child who was alleged to have been murdered, nor produce a body, nor even establish that a child in the area had disappeared; but under the water torture and the rack Yusuf and his friends must have confessed to anything. Do you think that such a fate could befall your people here in Granada?" - She gave me a look which seemed full of hatred. I did not know how I had offended her, but in the state she was in, I decided to apologize. She did not give me the chance. "When this city is taken, do you think that your lands, your houses and your gold will be less coveted than ours? Do you believe that your Faith will be more tolerated than ours? Do you believe that the fire burning at the stake will be kinder to one of the sons of Shem than to the other? In Granada it is as if we were on an ark, we have floated together and we shall sink together. Tomorrow, on the road to exile... "

'Realizing that she had gone too far, she stopped abruptly, and in an attempt to mitigate the effect of her words, put her arms around me with their wide sleeves and the perfume of musk, and began to sob against my shoulder. However, I did not begrudge her this, because the same images that were terrifying her were haunting my mind both in dreams and in wakefulness, and in that respect we were both sisters, orphans of the same dying city.

'We were still bemoaning our fate when I heard your father's steps returning home. I called him from my bedroom, and while he climbed the stairs I wiped my cheeks with the hem of my dress, while Sarah quickly covered her head and face. Muhammad's eyes were bloodshot, but I pretended not to notice to save him embarrassment. "Sarah has brought you a book so that you can explain to us what is in it." Your father had long since ceased to entertain the slightest prejudice against Gaudy Sarah, who now came to our house almost every day. He enjoyed exchanging opinions and news with her, and also liked to tease her about her appearance, and she would laugh good-naturedly. That day, however, he had no more heart to laugh than she. He took the book from her hands without saying a word and sat cross-legged in the doorway leafing through it. He immersed himself in it for more than an hour, while we watched him in silence; then he closed it and remained pensive. He looked towards me as if not seeing me: "Your father Sulaiman the bookseller once told me long ago that on the eve of all great happenings books like this appear which predict the end of the world, seeking to explain the severe decrees of the Most High in terms of the movements of the stars and the disobedience of men. People pass them to each other in secret, and they are comforted by reading them, because the misfortune of each of them becomes lost and forgotten like a drop of water in a raging torrent. This book says that your people should leave, Sarah, without waiting for Fate to knock at their door. As soon as you can do so, take your children and go away from this land."

Sarah uncovered her face to show her suffering. "Where shall I go?" It was less a question than a cry of distress, but your father replied by leafing through the book: "This man suggests Italy, or the land of the Ottomans, but you can even go to the Maghrib across the sea, which is nearer. That is where we shall go ourselves." He put down the book and went out without looking at us.

'That was the first time that your father mentioned exile, and I would have liked to question him further about this decision and the arrangements he had made, but I did not dare to do so. He himself only spoke to me about it once more, the next day, to tell me in low tones not to raise the subject in front of Warda.'

Over the next few days, the cannons and the mangonels stayed silent. Snow fell continuously upon Granada, covering it with a veil of peace and serenity which nothing seemed able to destroy. There was no fighting, and only the cries of children could be heard in the streets. How much would the city have wished that time would forget it! But it was on the move; the Christian year 1492 began on the last day of the month of Safar 897, and before dawn there came a loud knocking at our door. My mother woke with a start and called my father, who was sleeping with Warda that night. He went to open the door. Outside were some of the sultan's officers, who asked him to follow them on his horse. They had already collected several dozen people together, including some very young boys whose beardless faces were lit up by the snow. Muhammad went back into his house to put on some warm clothing, and then, accompanied by two soldiers, went to fetch his horse from the barn behind the house. Standing in the half-open door, with me half-asleep on her arm, and Warda's head peering over her shoulder, my mother questioned the officers to find out where her husband was being taken. They replied that the vizier al-Mulih had given them a list of people whom he wished to see urgently; they added that she had nothing to fear. My father also did his best to reassure her as he left.

When he reached the Plaza de la Tabla in front of the Alhambra, Muhammad could make out some five hundred prisoners as daylight was breaking, all on horseback, all wrapped in heavy woollen cloaks, surrounded by a thousand soldiers on foot or on horseback, who manifested no violence towards them, even verbally, simply surrounding them to prevent them escaping. Then the immense convoy moved off in silence, a veiled rider at its head, the soldiers walking in line alongside. It passed before the Gate of the Seven Stages, went along the ramparts, and left the city by the Najd Gate to arrive at the Genil, which was frozen over. A cherry orchard on the river bank was the first halting place of the silent and trembling caravan.

It was already daylight, but the fine crescent moon of the new month could still be seen in the sky. The veiled man uncovered his face and summoned to his side a dozen high dignitaries chosen from among the prisoners. To no one's surprise it was al-Mulih. He began by asking them not to be alarmed and apologized for not having explained the situation to them earlier.

'We had to leave the city to avoid any incident, any incautious reaction. Ferdinand has asked that five hundred notables from the great families of Granada should be left with him as hostages so that he can bring his troops into the city without fearing a trap. We too have every interest in the surrender taking place without the slightest violence. Reassure the others, tell them that they will be well treated and that it will all pass very quickly.'

The news was imparted to everyone without provoking more than a few inconsequential murmurs, since most felt proud to have been chosen as well as a certain sense of security in not being in the city when it would be invaded, which largely compensated for the irritation of temporary confinement. Others, like my father, would have preferred to be with their wives and their children at that crucial moment, but they knew that they could do nothing for them, and that the will of the Almighty must be fulfilled to the end.

They did not stop for more than half an hour, and then began to move on towards the west, always keeping within a stone's throw from the Genil. Soon a troop of Castilians appeared on the horizon, and when it drew level with the convoy, its leader took al-Mulih to one side and then, on an order from him, the soldiers of Granada turned their horses round and trotted back to the city, while Ferdinand's cavalry took their place around the hostages. The crescent had now disappeared from the sky. The convoy went on, even more silent, even more overcome with emotion, to the walls of Santa Fe.

'How strange, their new city built from our old stones,' thought Muhammad as he passed into this encampment which he had so often seen in the distance with a mixture of fear and curiosity. On all sides there was the bustle and commotion heralding a major attack, Ferdinand's soldiers preparing ostensibly to engage in the final combat, or rather to slaughter the city which they were now holding at bay, as a bull is destroyed in the arenas of Granada after being torn to pieces by a pack of dogs.

The same evening, of the first of January 1492, the vizier, who had stayed with the hostages, went back to Granada, accompanied this time by several Christian officers whom he was to bring into the city in accordance with the agreements. They went in at night, by the road which my father and his companions in captivity had taken, which had the advantage of not arousing the suspicions of the people of the city too early. The following day they appeared at the tower of Comares, where Boabdil handed them the keys of the fortress. Using the same secret road, several hundred Castilian soldiers soon arrived, and secured the ramparts. A bishop hoisted up a cross on the watchtower, and the soldiers cheered him, crying 'Castile', 'Castile', 'Castile', three times, which was their custom when they occupied a place. Hearing these cries, the people of Granada understood that the unthinkable had already taken place, and astounded that an event of such magnitude could have come to pass with so little disturbance, began to pray and chant, their eyes misted over and their knees weak.

As the news spread, the inhabitants came out into the streets, men and women together, Muslims and Jews, rich and poor, wandering around in a daze, jumping with a start at the slightest sound. My mother took me through one alleyway to another as far as Sabiqa, where she took up her position for several hours, observing everything that was happening around the Alhambra. I think I can remember having seen the Castilian soldiers that day, singing, shouting and strutting about on the walls. Towards noon, already drunk, they began to spread themselves out over the city, and Salma resigned herself to having to wait for her husband at home.

Three days later, one of our neighbors, a notary who was over seventy, who had been taken hostage with my father, was brought back to his house. He had feigned illness, and the Castilians had been afraid that he would die on them. From him my mother learned which way they had gone, and she decided to go at dawn the next morning and stand watch at the Najd Gate, right at the south of the city not far from the Genil. She judged it prudent to take Warda with her since she could talk to her co-religionists in case they challenged us.

So we left at the first hour of daylight, my mother carrying me and my sister Mariam in her mother's arms, both going slowly so as not to slip on the frozen snow. We passed through the old *qasba*, the Bridge of the Qadi, the Mauror Quarter, Granada-of-the-Jews, the Potters' Gate, without passing a soul. Only the metallic sounds of kitchen utensils being moved about reminded us from time to time that we were not in an abandoned encampment, haunted by ghosts, but in fact in a city where human beings of flesh and blood still felt the need to bang cooking pots together.

'It is true that it is barely daylight, but does that explain why no sentry is on duty at the Najd Gate?' asked my mother in a high voice.

She put me down on the ground and pushed one of the doors, which yielded easily, as it was already half open. We left the city, without really knowing which road to take.

We were still only a few steps from the walls when a strange sight presented itself to our astonished gaze. Two troops of horsemen seemed to be coming towards us, one from our right, coming up from the Genil at a brisk trot in spite of the slope, and the other from our left, coming from the direction of the Alhambra, moving awkwardly. Soon a rider detached himself from the latter group and went off at a faster pace. Returning quickly towards the city, we passed through the Najd Gate once more, without shutting the door behind us, in order to continue to watch without being seen. When the rider from the Alhambra was very close to us my mother stifled a cry:

'It is Boabdil!' she said, and fearing she had spoken too loudly put her hand to my mouth to keep me quiet, although I was completely silent and my sister too, both of us absorbed in the strange scene that was unfolding in front of us.

I could only see the sultan's turban which was wrapped round his head and covered his forehead down to his eyebrows. His horse looked somewhat colourless to me, in contrast to the two royal palfreys which now advanced from the other side at walking pace, covered with gold and silks. Boabdil made as if to dismount from his horse, but Ferdinand stopped him with a reassuring gesture. The sultan went towards his vanquisher and tried to seize his hand to kiss, but the king withdrew it, and Boabdil, who was leaning towards him, could only embrace his shoulder, showing that he was still treated as a prince. Not as prince of Granada, however; the new masters of the city had granted him a small estate in the Alpujarra Mountains where he was allowed to set himself up with his family.

The scene at the Najd Gate lasted only a few seconds, after which Ferdinand and Isabela made their way towards the Alhambra while Boabdil, taken aback for a moment, turned round once in the opposite direction before resuming his journey. He rode so slowly that he was soon caught up by his train, which consisted of more than a hundred horses and mules carrying men, women and children and a large number of coffers and objects wrapped up in cloths. The next day it was said that he had disinterred the corpses of his ancestors and had taken them with him to prevent them falling into the hands of the enemy.

It was also claimed that he had not been able to take all his goods with him, and that he had caused an immense fortune to be hidden in the caves of Mount Cholair. How many people vowed to find it! Will anyone believe me when I say that all my life I have met men whose sole dream was this vanished gold? I have even met people who are known everywhere as *kannazin*, who have no other occupation than seeking treasure, particularly that of Boabdil. At Fez they are so numerous that they hold regular meetings, and when I was living in that city they even elected a representative to concern himself with the legal cases constantly brought against them by the owners of the buildings whose foundations they weakened in the course of their excavations. These *kannazin* are convinced that the riches abandoned in the past by princes have been put under a spell to prevent them being discovered. This explains their constant recourse to sorcerers whom they employ to unravel the spell. It is impossible to have a conversation with a *kannaz* without him swearing that he has already seen heaps of gold and silver in an underground passage, but could not lay his hands on them because he did not know the correct incantations or because he did not have the proper perfumes on him. And he will show you, without letting you leaf through it, a book that describes the places where treasure is to be found!

For my part I do not know whether the treasure which the Nasrid rulers had amassed over the centuries is still buried in the land of Andalus, but I do not think so, since Boabdil went into exile with no hope of ever returning, and the Rumis had allowed him to take away all that he desired. He departed into oblivion, rich but miserable, and as he passed over the last ridge from which he could still see Granada, he stood motionless for a long time, with troubled mien and his spirit frozen in torpor. The Castilians called this place 'The Moor's last sigh', because, it was said, the fallen

sultan had shed tears there, of shame and remorse. 'You weep like a woman for the kingdom which you did not defend like a man,' his mother Fatima would have said.

'In the eyes of this woman,' my father would tell me later, 'what had just taken place was not only the victory of Castile, but also, and perhaps more importantly, her rival's revenge. Sultan's daughter, sultan's wife, sultan's mother Fatima was steeped in politicking and intrigue, far more than Boabdil, who would have been perfectly content with a life of pleasure without ambition or risk. It was she who had propelled her son to power, in order that he should dethrone her own husband Abu'l-Hasan, who was guilty of having deserted her for the beautiful Christian captive Soraya. It was Fatima who made Boabdil escape from the tower of Comares and organized in minute detail his rebellion against the old monarch. It was she who had ousted the concubine and excluded her young children from power forever.

'But destiny is more changeable than the skin of a chameleon, as one of the poets of Denia used to say. Thus while Fatima was escaping from the abandoned city, Soraya promptly resumed her former name, Isabela de Solis, and had her two children Said and Nasr baptized, becoming Don Fernando and Don Juan, infantes of Granada. They were not the only members of the royal family to abandon the faith of their fathers to become grandees of Spain. Yahya al-Najjar, briefly the hero of the "war party", had done so before them, and was given the title of Duke of Granada-Venegas. After the fall of the city Yahya was made "alguazil mayor", chief of police, which amply demonstrated that he had gained the full confidence of the victors. Other people followed his example, among whom was a secretary of the sultan, named Ahmad, whom people had long suspected of being a spy in Ferdinand's service.

'The days which follow defeat often lay bare the corruption of souls. Here I am thinking less of Yahya than of the vizier al-Mulih. Because as he had explained to us at such length, while negotiating the welfare of the widows and orphans of Granada, this man had not forgotten himself. He had obtained from Ferdinand, as the price of the surrender which he had hastened so cleverly, twenty thousand gold castilians, or nearly ten thousand maravedis, as well as vast estates. Other dignitaries of the regime also accommodated themselves without difficulty to the domination of the Rumis.'

In fact life immediately began again in occupied Granada, as if Ferdinand had wanted to prevent the Muslims departing for exile en masse. The hostages returned to their families the very day after the entry of the king and queen into the city, and my father told us that he had been treated with more consideration than if he had been the guest of a prince. At Santa Fe he and his companions were not confined to prison; they could go to the market and walk around the streets in small groups, although accompanied by guards whose task was both to keep them under surveillance and to protect them against outbursts on the part of any drunken or overexcited soldiers. It was during one of these strolls that someone pointed out to my father at the door of a tavern a Genoese sailor whom all Santa Fe was talking about and making fun of. People called him 'Cristobal Colon'. He wanted, he said, to fit out caravels to sail westwards to the Indies, since the earth was round, and he made no secret of his hope

to obtain part of the treasure of the Alhambra for this expedition. He had been in Santa Fe for weeks, insisting on meeting the king or the queen, who avoided him, although he had been recommended to them by eminent personages. While waiting to be received, he sent them a stream of messages and supplications, which, in these warlike times, did not fail to irritate them. Muhammad never saw this Genoese again, but I myself often had occasion to hear men speak of him.

A few days after my father's return, Duke Yahya summoned him to resume his functions as weigh-master, because, he told him, foodstuffs would soon be returning to the markets in abundance, and it was essential to take care that any fraud should be repressed. Initially, my father was disgusted by the mere sight of the renegade. But he ended up by working with him just as he had done with all other police chiefs, not without murmuring curses from time to time when he remembered the hope that this man had once symbolized for the Muslims. The presence of Yahya also had the effect of reassuring the city's notables. While some already knew him well, all began to court him more assiduously than they had done when he was the unfortunate rival of Boabdil.

'In his anxiety to calm the fears of the vanquished for their fate,' my father recalled, 'Ferdinand used to make regular visits to Granada to make sure that his men were faithfully carrying out the agreements. Although concerned for his own safety in the first few days, the king soon began to move freely round the city, visiting the market, under close escort of course, and inspecting the old walls. It is true that he avoided staying the night in our city for months, preferring to return to Santa Fe before sunset, but his unease, though perfectly understandable, was not accompanied by any iniquitous or discriminatory measure or any violation of the treaty of surrender. Ferdinand's solicitude, whether sincere or feigned, was such that the Christians who visited Granada used to say to the Muslims: "You are now more dear to the heart of our sovereign than we ourselves have ever been." Some were even as malevolent as to say that the Moors had bewitched the king to make him stop the Christians taking their property from them.

'Our sufferings,' sighed Muhammad, 'were soon going to absolve us and make us recall that even when free we would henceforth be chained fast to our humiliation. However, in the months immediately after the fall of Granada - may God deliver her! - we were spared the worst, because before it was let loose upon us, the law of the conquerors rained down upon the Jews. To her great misfortune, Sarah had been correct.'

* * *

In Jumada al-Thania of that year, three months after the fall of Granada, the royal heralds came to the center of the city, proclaiming, to a roll of drums and in both Arabic and Castilian, an edict of Ferdinand and Isabela. They decreed the 'formal termination of all relations between Christians and Jews, which can only be accomplished by the expulsion of all the Jews from our kingdom'.

Henceforth they would have to choose between baptism and exile. If they chose the latter, they had four months to sell their properties and belongings, but they could take with them neither gold nor silver.

When Sarah came to see us on the day after this proclamation, her face was swollen after a long night of weeping, but from her eyes, now dry, shone that serenity which often accompanies the coming to pass of a long-anticipated drama. She was even able to make fun of the royal edict, reciting the sentences she remembered in a hoarse man's voice:

'We have been told by the inquisitors and others that commerce between Jews and Christians leads to the most shocking evils. The Jews seek to win back the newly-converted Christians and their children by handing them books of Jewish prayers, by obtaining unleavened bread for them at Easter, by instructing them in the forbidden foods and by persuading them to conform to the Law of Moses. Our Holy Catholic Faith is becoming diminished and debased.'

Twice my mother asked her to keep her voice down, because we were seated in the courtyard that spring morning and she did not want this sarcasm to reach the ears of a spiteful neighbor. Very fortunately, Warda had gone to the market with my father and sister, because I do not know how she would have reacted to hearing the words 'Holy Catholic Faith' pronounced with such disdain.

As soon as Sarah had finished her imitation my mother asked her the only important question: 'What have you decided to do? Are you going to choose conversion or exile?'

A feigned smile greeted this question, then a falsely casual 'I still have time!' My mother waited several weeks before broaching the subject again, but the reply was the same.

But at the beginning of the summer, when three-quarters of the time allowed to the Jews had expired, Gaudy Sarah herself came to say: 'I have heard that the Grand Rabbi of all Spain, Abraham Senior, has just had himself baptized with his sons and all his relatives. At first I was appalled, and then I said to myself, "Sarah, widow of Jacob Perdoniel, perfume seller of Granada, are you a better Jew than Rabbi Abraham?" So I have decided to have myself baptized, together with my five children, leaving it to the God of Moses to judge what is in my heart.'

Sarah's anguish was voluble that day, and my mother looked at her tenderly: 'I am glad that you are not leaving. I shall also stay in the city, because my cousin has not mentioned exile again.'

However, less than a week later, Sarah had changed her mind. One evening she arrived at our house with three of her children, the youngest hardly bigger than myself.

'I have come to bid you farewell. I have finally decided to go. There is a caravan leaving for Portugal tomorrow morning; I am going to join it. Yesterday I married my two oldest girls, aged fourteen and thirteen, so that their husbands can look after them, and I sold my house to one of the king's soldiers for the price of four mules.'

Then she added, in an attempt at an excuse: 'Salma, if I stay, I shall be afraid every day until I die, and every day I shall think of leaving and shall not be able to.'

'Even if you have been baptized?' my mother was astounded.

In reply, Gaudy Sarah told a story that had been making the rounds of the Jewish Quarter of Granada over the last few days and had finally made her decide to choose exile.

'It is said that a wise man of our community put three pigeons on a window of his house. One was killed and plucked, and he had attached a little label to it which read: "This convert was the last to leave." The second pigeon, plucked but still alive, had a label saying "This convert left a little earlier," while the third was still alive and still had feathers, and its label read: "This one was the first to leave." '

Sarah and her family went away without looking back. It was written that we were soon to join them on the path of exile.

The Year of Mihrajan

898 A.H.

22 October 1492 -11 October 1493

Never more, since that year, did I dare pronounce the word Mihrajan in the presence of my father, since its mention would plunge him into the saddest of memories. And my family would never celebrate that feast again.

It all happened on the ninth day of the holy month of Ramadan, or rather, I should say, on St John's Day, the twenty-fourth of June, since Mihrajan was celebrated not in accordance with the Muslim year but following the Christian calendar. The day marks the summer solstice, which punctuates the cycle of the sun, and thus has no place in our lunar year. At Granada, and, by the way, at Fez, we followed both calendars at

once. If one works the land, if one needs to know when to graft the apple trees, cut the sugar cane or round up hands for the harvest, only the solar months make sense. At the approach of Mihrajan, for instance, it was known that it was time to pick the late-flowering roses, which some women wear at their breast. On the other hand, when leaving on a journey, it is not the solar cycle which is consulted, but the lunar one; is the moon full or new, waxing or waning, because it is thus that the stages of a caravan are calculated.

This said, I should not be faithful to the truth if I did not add that the Christian calendar was not used only for agricultural purposes, but that it also provided numerous occasions for feasting, of which my compatriots never deprived themselves. It was not sufficient to celebrate the birth of the Prophet, al-Mawlud, with great poetry competitions in public places and the distribution of food to the needy. The birth of the Messiah was also celebrated, with special dishes prepared from wheat, beans, chick-peas and vegetables. And if the first day of the Islamic year, Ras al-Sana, was marked particularly by the presentation of formal congratulations and good wishes at the Alhambra, the first day of the Christian year was the occasion for celebrations which children would wait for impatiently. They would sport masks, and would go and knock at rich people's houses, singing rounds, which would win them several handfuls of dried fruit, less as a reward than as a way of stopping the racket. Again, Nawruz, the Persian New Year, was welcomed with pomp. The day before, countless marriages were performed, since it was said, the season was propitious for fertility, and on the day itself, toys shaped like horses or giraffes made out of baked clay or glazed pottery were sold on every corner in spite of the Islamic interdiction. There were of course also the major Muslim festivals: 'al-Adha, the most important of the *'ids*, for which many of the people of Granada would ruin themselves to sacrifice a sheep or to buy new clothes; the Breaking of the Fast at the end of Ramadan, when even the poorest could not feast with fewer than ten different dishes; al-Ashura, when the dead were remembered, but also the occasion on which expensive presents were exchanged. To all these festivals should be added Easter, al-Asir, the beginning of autumn, and above all the famous Mihrajan.

On the latter occasion it was customary to light great fires of straw. People used to say with a smile that as this was the shortest night of the year, there was no point in sleeping. In addition it was useless to seek any rest at all, as bands of youths roamed through the city until morning, singing at the tops of their voices. They also had the dreadful habit of drenching all the streets with water, which made them slippery for the next three days.

That year, these hooligans were joined by hundreds of Castilian soldiers, who had since early in the morning been frequenting the numerous taverns which had been opened since the fall of the city. So my father had not the slightest desire to take part in the rejoicing. But my tears, and those of my sister, and the pleadings of Warda and my mother persuaded him to take us for a stroll, 'without leaving al-Baisin', he insisted. So he waited for sunset, since it was the month of the Fast, quickly swallowed down a well-deserved bowl of lentil soup - how unbearable Ramadan is

when the days are so long - and then took us to the Flag Gate, where temporary stalls had been set up by vendors of sponge doughnuts, dried figs and apricot sorbets, made with snow brought on the backs of mules from the heights of Mount Cholair.

Fate had given us an appointment in the street of the Old Citadel Wall. My father was walking in front, holding Mariam in one hand and me in the other, exchanging a word or two with each neighbor that he passed. My mother was a couple of steps behind, closely followed by Warda, when suddenly Warda cried 'Juan!' and stood stock still. On our right, a young moustachioed soldier stopped in turn, with a little drunken hiccup, trying with some difficulty to identify the veiled woman who had addressed him thus. My father immediately sensed the danger, and leaped towards his concubine, seized her urgently by the elbow, and said in a low voice: 'Let's go home, Warda! In the name of Jesus the Messiah, let's go home!'

His tone was imploring, because the said Juan was accompanied by four other soldiers, all visibly drunk and armed, like him, with imposing halberds. All the other passers-by had drawn aside, in order to watch the drama without being involved in it. Warda explained with a cry: It s my brother!

Then she advanced towards the young man, who was still dumbfounded: Juan, I am Esmeralda, your sister!

With these words she pulled her right hand from Muhammad's clenched fist and deftly raised her veil. The soldier stepped forward, held her for several moments by the shoulders, and held her closely to him. My father turned pale and began to tremble. He realized that he was about to lose Warda, and even more serious, that he would be humiliated in front of the whole quarter, his virility impugned.

As for me, I did not understand anything of the drama unfolding before my childish eyes. I can only remember clearly the moment when the soldier grabbed hold of me. He had just said to Warda that she should accompany him and return to their village, which he called Alcantarilla. She suddenly began to hesitate. Although she had expressed her spontaneous delight at finding her brother again after five years in captivity, she was not sure that she wanted to leave my father's house to go back to her own family, burdened with a daughter which a Moor had fathered upon her. She would certainly no longer find a husband. She had not been unhappy in the house of Muhammad the weigh-master, who had fed her, clothed her, and not left her on her own more than two nights on end. And then, after having lived in a city like Granada, even in times of desolation, the prospect of returning to bury herself in a little village near Murcia was not enticing. It could be imagined that such thoughts were running through her head when her brother shook her impatiently: Are these children yours?

She leant unsteadily against a wall, and stammered out a 'No', immediately followed by a 'Yes'. Hearing the 'yes', Juan leapt towards me and snatched me in his arms.

How shall I ever forget the cry which my mother let out? She threw herself on the soldier, scratching him, raining down blows upon him, while I wrestled as best I could. But the young man was not put off. He quickly got rid of me and glanced at his sister reproachfully: So only the girl is yours?

She said nothing, which was answer enough for Juan.

'Will you take her with you or leave her to them?' His tone was so severe that the unfortunate girl took fright.

'Calm yourself, Juan,' she begged him, 'I don't want a scandal. Tomorrow I will take my belongings and I will leave for Alcantarilla.'

But the soldier would not listen to this. You're my sister, and you're going to collect your baggage immediately and follow me.

Encouraged by Warda's about-turn, my father came closer, saying: She is my wife!

He said it in Arabic and then in bad Castilian. Juan slapped him with all his might, sending him flying across the muddy street. My mother began to wail like a hired mourner, while Warda cried out: Don't hurt him! He has always treated me well. He is my husband!

The soldier, who had grabbed hold of his sister roughly, hesitated a moment before saying in softer tones:

'As far as I'm concerned, you were his captive, and you no longer belong to him since we have taken possession of this city. If you tell me that he is your husband, he can keep you, but he must be baptized immediately and a priest must bless your marriage.'

Warda now directed her entreaties towards my father: Accept, Muhammad, otherwise we shall be separated! There was a silence. Someone in the crowd cried out: God is great!

My father, who was still on the ground, got up slowly, walked with dignity towards Warda and said, in a shaking voice: 'I will give you your clothes and your daughter' before walking towards the house past a line of approving murmurs.

'He wanted to save face before the neighbors,' said my mother in a detached tone, 'but all the same he felt diminished and impotent.'

Then she added, doing her best not to be sarcastic: 'For your father, it was at that moment that Granada really fell into the hands of the enemy.'

* * *

For days, Muhammad stayed at home prostrate and inconsolable, refusing even to join his friends for the meals at the breaking of the Fast, the traditional *iftars*. No one begrudged him this however, because his misfortune was known to all the very evening of Mihrajan, and more than once the neighbors came to bring him, as if to a sick man, the dishes which he had not been able to taste at their houses. Salma made herself inconspicuous, only speaking to him to answer his questions, forbidding me to bother him, not imposing her presence upon him but never being so far from him that he had to ask for anything twice.

If my mother was upset, she kept her spirits up, because she was convinced that time would bring her cousin's sadness to an end. What upset her was to see Muhammad so devoted to his concubine, and especially that this attachment had been so flaunted in front of all the gossips of al-Baisin. When, as a youth, I asked her whether, in spite of everything, she had not been pleased when her rival departed, she denied it vigorously:

'A sensible wife seeks to be the first of her husband's women, because it is a delusion to wish to be the only one.'

Adding, with feigned cheerfulness:

'Whatever anyone says about it, being the only wife is no more pleasant than being an only child. You work more, you become bored, and you have to put up with the temper and the demands of the husband by yourself. It is true that there is jealousy and intrigue, and argument, but at least this takes place at home, because when the husband begins to take his pleasures outside, he is lost to all his wives.'

It was no doubt for this reason that Salma began to panic on the last day of Ramadan, when Muhammad leaped up from his usual place and went out of the house with a determined step. She only learned two days later that he had been to see Hamid, called *al-fakkak*, the old 'deliverer' of Granada, who had for more than twenty years been involved in the difficult but lucrative task of ransoming Muslim captives in Christian territory.

There had always been, in the land of Andalus, people responsible for looking for prisoners and obtaining their release. They existed not only among our people but also among the Christians, who had long had the custom of nominating an 'alfaqque mayor', often a high state official, assisted by numerous other 'deliverers'. The families of the captives would report their disappearance - a soldier fallen into the hands of the enemy, an inhabitant of a city which had been invested, a peasant girl captured after a raid. The *fakkak*, or one of his representatives, would then begin his investigations, going himself into enemy territory, sometimes to distant lands, disguised as a merchant, or sometimes taking advantage of his rank, to find those who

had been lost and discuss the sum required as ransom. Since many families could not pay the sums required, collections were organized, and no alms were more valued by the believers than those which were given to assist in the release of the faithful from captivity. Many pious individuals used to ruin themselves by ransoming captives whom they had often never seen, hoping for no other reward than the benevolence of the Most High. On the other hand, some deliverers were no more than vultures who fed on the misery of families by extorting from them the little money that they had.

Hamid was not of that kind; his modest demeanour bore witness.

'He welcomed me with the formal courtesy of those accustomed to receive streams of requests,' my father told me, with hesitations which the years had not swept away. 'He invited me to sit down on a comfortable cushion, and after having duly asked about my health, he begged me to tell him what had led me to him. When I told him, he could not stop himself letting out a loud laugh, which ended with a prolonged burst of coughing. Much offended, I rose to take my leave, but Hamid took me by the sleeve. "I am your father's age," he said, "you should not hold it against me. Do not take my laughter as an insult but as a tribute to your incredible effrontery. So, the person you want to recover is not a Muslim girl but a Castilian Christian girl whom you dared to keep captive in your house eighteen months after the fall of Granada, when the first decision taken by the conquerors was to set free, with great ceremony, the seven hundred last Christian captives remaining in our city." I could only answer "Yes". He looked at me, regarded my clothes for some time, and judging me to be a respectable person, began to speak slowly and kindly. "My son, I can well understand that you are attached to this woman, and if you tell me that you have always treated her with consideration, and that you cherish the daughter you have had by her, I truly believe you. But as you well know, not all slaves were treated thus, neither here nor in Castile. Most of them passed their days carrying water or making sandals, and at night they were stalled like animals, chains around their feet or necks, in squalid underground caves. Thousands of our brothers still endure this fate, and no one bothers about their deliverance. Think of them, my son, and help me buy some of them back, rather than pursuing a chimera, because, of this you must be certain, never more in the land of Andalus can a Muslim give orders to a Christian man, nor even to a Christian woman. If you are minded to get this woman back, you will have to go through a church." He uttered an oath, passed the palms of his hands across his face before continuing: "Take refuge in God, and ask Him to grant you patience and resignation."

'As I was getting up to go, disappointed and angry,' continued my father, Hamid offered me a final piece of advice in a confidential tone: "In this city there are many war widows, many impoverished orphan girls, many disabled women. There are almost certainly some in your own family. Has not the Book stipulated that those men who can do so should shield them with their protection? It is at the time of the greatest tragedies, such as those which are raining down upon us, that a generous Muslim should take to himself two, three or four wives, because, while increasing his own pleasures, he carries out a praiseworthy act which serves the whole community.

Tomorrow is the 'id, think of all those women who will celebrate in tears." I left the old *fakkak* not knowing whether it was Heaven or Hell that had guided me to his door.'

Even today, I am quite incapable of saying. Because in the end Hamid about his task with such skill, such devotion, such zeal, that the life of all my family was to be turned upside down by it for many long years to come.

The Year of the Crossing

899 A.H.

12 October 1493 - 1 October 1494

'A lost homeland is like the corpse of a near relative; bury it with respect and believe in eternal life.'

The words of Astaghfirullah sounded in time to the rhythm of the amber rosary which his thin pious fingers told incessantly. Around the preacher were four serious bearded faces, including that of my father Muhammad, four long faces each showing the same distress which the shaikh was stirring up without mercy.

'Go, emigrate, let God guide your steps, for if you accept to live under submission and humiliation, if you accept to live in a country where the precepts of the Faith are held up to ridicule, where the Book and the Prophet - on whom be prayers and peace! - are insulted daily you will give a shameful image of Islam for which the Most High will call you to account on the Day of Judgement. It is said in the Book that on that day the Angel of Death will ask you: "Is not the land of God vast enough? Could you not have left your homeland to seek asylum elsewhere?" Henceforth the fires of Hell will be your dwelling place.'

It was in that year of ordeals and heartbreaks that the period of three years allowed to the citizens of Granada to choose between submission and exile came to an end. According to the surrender agreement, we had until the beginning of the Christian year 1495 to decide, but as the crossing to the Maghrib beyond the sea might prove hazardous after the month of October, it was considered better to leave in spring, or, at the latest, in summer. Those who wished to remain behind were known by the epithet already in use to indicate Muslims living in Christian territory, 'tamed', 'mudajjan', corrupted in Castilian to 'mudejar'. In spite of this derogatory adjective, many of the citizens of Granada still hesitated.

The confabulation taking place in the courtyard of our house in al-Baisin - may God restore it to us - was like a thousand others held that year to discuss the fate of the community, sometimes even of a single one of its members. Astaghfirullah took part whenever he could, his tone lofty but his voice low to indicate that he was now in

enemy territory. If he himself had still not taken the road to exile, he hastened to explain, it was solely to turn aside the waverers from the way to perdition.

Waverers were plenty among those present, beginning with my father Muhammad, who had not despaired of retrieving Warda and his daughter, who had sworn that he would not leave without taking them with him, under the very noses of all the soldiers of Aragon and Castile. By dint of insisting, on visit after visit, he had managed to extract a promise from

Hamid the deliverer to get a message through to his concubine. In return for a large sum of money he had also succeeded in charging a Genoese merchant called Bartolomeo with a similar mission for he had been living in Granada for a long time, and had made his fortune by ransoming captives. Hence he did not want to leave before he had reaped the fruit of his costly undertakings. His misfortune had turned him into a different person. Oblivious both to the general disapproval and to Salma's tears, he took refuge in his own misery from the miseries encompassing him.

Our neighbour Hamza the barber had other reasons for wavering. He had estates, which he had bought plot by plot, the fruit of twenty years of delicate and lucrative circumcisions, and had vowed not to depart until he had resold everything at a good price, down to the last vine; for that he had to wait, because so many of those who wished to leave, anxious to be on their way, were selling their lands for a song, and would-be buyers were like kings.

'I want to make those accursed Rumis pay through the nose,' he said in justification.

Astaghfirullah, whom Hamza had always admired, did not want him to remain in a state of impurity, since his blade had purified half the boys of al-Baisin.

Another of our neighbors, Sa'd, an old gardener who had recently been struck blind, did not feel able to leave.

'You can't plant an old tree in alien soil,' he would say.

Pious, humble, and fearing God in all things, he had come to hear from the mouth of the shaikh himself that which the *ulama* versed in the Word and in the righteous Tradition recommended for cases like his own.

'Hamza and Sa'd arrived at our house just after the midday prayer,' my mother remembered. 'Muhammad let them in, while I withdrew with you upstairs to my part of the house. They had pallid cheeks and false smiles, just like your father, who sat them on some old cushions in a shady corner of the courtyard, only communicating with them in inaudible mumbles. The shaikh arrived an hour later, and it was only then that Muhammad called me to make some fresh syrup.'

Astaghfirullah was accompanied by Hamid, of whose links with the master of the house he was well aware. The old deliverer had been touched by my father's folly, and if he had seen him often over the past year, it was less from a desire to reason with him than to experience his boldness, his youth and his turbulent passions. That day however, the visit of the *fakkak* had a solemn air about it. He had once more become the religious dignitary which he was known to be, his withered eyelids screwed up in an attempt at severity, his words the fruit of his long commerce with adversity.

'All my life I have had to do with captives who dream only to be free, and I cannot understand how a free man of sound mind can voluntarily choose captivity.'

Old Sa'd was the first to reply:

'If we all depart, Islam will be rooted out from this land for ever, and when, by the grace of God, the Turks arrive to cross swords with the Rumis, we shall not be there to assist them.'

The solemn voice of Astaghfirullah silenced the gardener: To live in a land conquered by the infidels is forbidden by our religion, just as it is forbidden to eat the flesh of dead animals, blood, and pork, just as murder is forbidden.

He added, resting his hand heavily on Sa'd's shoulder:

'Every Muslim who stays in Granada increases the number of inhabitants in the land of the infidels and helps to strengthen the enemies of God and His Prophet.'

A tear trickled down the old man's cheek until it edged its way timidly into the hairs of his beard.

'I am too old, too ill and too poor to limp along the roads and across the seas. Has not the Prophet said: "Do what is easy for you and do not seek out what is difficult in vain?"'

Hamid took pity on the gardener, and at the risk of contradicting the shaikh, recited a comforting verse from the Sura of Women in a singsong voice:

'... except for those who are incapable, men, women and children, who have no means at their disposal and for whom no way is open, to them God can grant absolution, He is the Lord of absolution, the Lord of forgiveness.'

Sa'd hastened to add: He has spoken the truth, Almighty God.

Astaghfirullah did not deny the obvious:

'God is good and his patience is limitless. He does not ask the same things from those who can and those who cannot. If you wish to obey Him by emigrating, but find that you cannot, He knows to read in your heart and to judge you for your intentions. He will not condemn you to hell, but your own hell could well be on this earth and in this land. Your hell will be the daily humiliation for you and the women of your family.'

Suddenly pressing the palms of his hands on the warm ground he turned his whole body round towards my father and then towards the barber, looking at them fixedly:

'And you, Muhammad? And you, Hamza? Are you also poor and ill? Are you not important people, prominent in the community? What excuse do you have for not obeying the commandments of Islam? Do not hope for pardon or forgiveness if you follow the path of Yahya the renegade, for the Most High is demanding towards those on whom He has showered his blessings.'

The two men, both exceedingly embarrassed, swore that they had no intention of remaining for ever in the land of the infidels, and that they desired only to regulate their affairs so as to depart in good order.

'Woe to him who trades Paradise for earthly things!' cried Astaghfirullah, while the deliverer, not wanting to attack Muhammad, whom he knew to be in a tense state of mind and capable of foolishness, addressed the two recalcitrants in a fatherly way:

'Since it has fallen into the hands of the infidels, this city has become a place of infamy for us all. It is a prison, and its door is being slowly closed again. Why not take advantage of this last chance to escape?'

Neither the curses of the preacher nor the remonstrations of the deliverer persuaded my father to leave his city. The day after their meeting, he went to Hamid's house asking for news of his beloved. Salma suffered in silence and hoped for exile.

'We were already experiencing,' she said, 'the first of the summer heat, but in the gardens of Granada there were few strollers and the flowers had no radiance. The finest houses of the city had been emptied. The shops in the suqs did not display their wares. There was no more hubbub in the streets, even in the poorer quarters. In the public places the Castilian soldiers rubbed shoulders only with beggars, since all the Muslims who valued their honor and had not left were ashamed of exposing themselves to view.'

And she added in a voice full of grief:

'When one disobeys the Most High, it is better to do so in secret, because to strut about with one's sin is to sin twofold.'

She repeated this constantly to my father without managing to shake him.

'The only eyes that see me in the streets of Granada belong to those who have not departed. How can they dare to reproach me?'

Furthermore, he contended, his dearest wish was to distance himself from this city where his honor as a man had been held to ridicule; but he would not flee like a jackal. He would leave with head high and a disdainful air.

Soon came Dhu'l-Qa'da, the penultimate month of the year, and it was Hamza's turn to take to the road. Urged on by his old mother the midwife, who bombarded

him with her lamentations, accusing him of wanting to drag his whole family down to Gehenna, he left without selling his lands, promising to come back by himself in a few months to find a buyer. For Astaghfirullah too the hour of exile had come; he took with him neither gold nor clothing, only a Qur'an and provisions for the journey.

'Then came Dhu'l-Hijja the sky became more clouded over and the nights cooler. Your father still persisted obstinately, passing his days between the deliverer and the Genoese, returning in the evenings either exhausted or over-excited, worried or serene, but never with a word about our departure. Then all at once, less than two weeks before the New Year, he was possessed by a disconcerting feverishness; he had to go immediately, he had to be in Almeria in three days. Why Almeria? Were there no ports closer at hand, such as Adra, from which Boabdil had embarked, or La Rabita, or Salobrena, or Almunecar? No, it had to be Almeria, and we had to get there in three days. The evening before our departure, Hamid came to wish us a good journey, and I understood that he was privy to Muhammad's high spirits. I asked him if he too would emigrate. "No", he replied, "I shall not go until the release of the last Muslim from captivity."

Salma replied:

'You risk having to stay in the land of the infidel for a long time yet!'

The deliverer smiled enigmatically, but not without an air of melancholy:

'Sometimes it is necessary to disobey the Most High to obey Him more effectively,' he murmured, as if only speaking to himself - or perhaps directly to his Creator.

We left the next day before the dawn prayer, my father on horseback, my mother and myself on a mule, our baggage distributed on the backs of five other animals. Near the Najd Gate on the southern side of the city we joined several dozen other travelers, with whom we journeyed the better part of the road to ensure our safety. There were many bandits in the neighborhood of the city and in the mountain passes, because everyone knew that great wealth was constantly being brought down to the coast.

* * *

The great confusion which prevailed in the port of Almeria left an indelible impression on my childish eyes. Like ourselves, many people seemed to have decided to leave at the last moment, and they crowded together to take the smallest boat by storm. Here and there a few Castilian soldiers attempted to calm down troublesome mischief-makers by shouting threats at them; others checked the contents of a trunk with greedy eyes. It had been agreed that the emigrants could take all their property with them without restriction, but it was often not unhelpful to leave a piece of gold between the fingers of an over-zealous officer. On the beach, business was in full swing, the owners of the boats being subjected to endless sermons on the fate which

God reserves for those who profit from the misfortunes of the Muslims, apparently to no effect, since the fares for the crossing continued to increase by the hour. The lure of gain lulls consciences to sleep, and moments of panic are not the most opportune for arousing generosity. Resignedly, the men emptied their purses and signalled to their families to make haste. Once on board, they did their best to keep their wives and daughters from being exposed to promiscuous encounters, a difficult task when three hundred people were stuffed into a small galley which had never carried more than a hundred.

When we arrived my father refused to mix with the crowd. From the back of his horse he surveyed the scene around the port, before making for a little wooden cabin, at the doorway of which a well-dressed man welcomed him eagerly. We followed him at a distance. He signalled to us to come closer. A few minutes later we were seated comfortably on top of our luggage in an empty galley on which we had embarked by means of a gangway that was drawn up behind us. The man, who was none other than Hamid's brother, was the director of customs of Almeria, a post which the Castilians had not yet taken away from him. The little boat belonged to him, and it would not be taking on passengers until the next day. My mother gave my father and myself a piece of ginger to chew to prevent seasickness, and she herself took a large chunk. Soon night fell and we all went to sleep after having eaten several meatballs which our host had brought to us.

Shouts and commotion awoke us at dawn. Dozens of shouting men, women veiled in black and white, and dazed or squealing children seemed to be taking our galley by storm. We had to cling to our luggage not to be pushed aside or perhaps even thrown overboard. My mother held me to her as the boat began to get further from the shore. Around us, women and old men prayed and wept, their voices barely drowned by the sounds of the sea.

Only my father remained serene on this journey into exile, and Salma could even see a strange smile playing on his lips the whole length of the journey. For, in the very heart of defeat, he had managed to achieve his own tiny field of victory.
