

A Translation into English of Khalil I. Al-Fuzai's¹ "Chivalry of the Village"²

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ABSTRACT

Hameed goes to the city to sell his crops and buy some goods for his wedding. His fate leads him to meet a thief. He beats the thief and is taken to prison. At the beginning of the story, Khalil I. Al-Fuzai paints a living picture, showing how farmers arrange their trips to the city, using donkeys as a means of transportation. The animals are treated without mercy; though living creatures, they are beaten and overloaded: "The donkey may feel the human being's injustice. Hence it takes the opportunity to drop its load and run away ...³" and "donkeys ... shake their heads up and down with each step they take ..." as if commenting on their owners' treatment of them. The story addresses the village-city relationship as well; the city is important for village residents as a marketplace where they can "sell their loads of fruits and crops from their farms ..." and buy what they need for their families and neighbors, as shown in both this story and the previous one, "Thursday Fair." In other stories, like "Wednesday Train," people go to the city to look for jobs. In dealing with city customers, experience and advice are important; if the protagonist had not figured out that the customer had disappeared into a mosque and slipped out the other door, he could have waited as long as he wanted and still have left empty-handed. In this case, the advice of Olyan's mother in "Thursday Fair" is relevant for naïve village youths: "Salesmen of the city are deceitful, so be careful, O Olyan." The same is true for city customers, as this story shows. On the other hand, the story demonstrates that one of the main characteristics of rural people is that they are helpful and united, so the author refers to them as if they are one cooperative group. The country people are also hard workers. Even on his wedding day, Hameed goes to the city to sell the crops of his land. As a countryman, he does not want to bother his friends, and likes to assume his business on his own: "It will be a burden for you to add my things to yours to sell." In addition, the story refers to a cultural issue: In some Arabian societies, a man cannot see the woman he is going to marry until she becomes his wife—and at that moment, he cannot go back on his word. Usually, a man's female relatives choose the girl and, if her family accepts the proposal, then the man's family prepares for the marriage. Hence, it is the judgment of the female relatives that rules in such situations. Sometimes a previous friendship or an earlier acquaintance between the two females may affect the whole story, as we will see in "Wednesday Train." So, "the bride here to some extent is similar to a watermelon ..." for the bridegroom. Hameed uses "watermelon" in his simile because he knows well such a fruit; it is his main produce. At the end, the story refers to an administrative issue: a cop "takes [Hameed] to the police station." In the afternoon, all the investigators at the police station are either busy with cases they want to finish before going home, or they have already left their offices, so Hameed must spend the night there, waiting for the next business day before an investigation can take place. Briefly, this story relates that village people are simple and innocent, but when it comes to values they believe in, they do not hesitate to take action.⁴

Key words: Khalil al-Fuzai, Saudi, Short Story, "Chivalry of the Village"

TRANSLATION

In the early morning, before the cocks crow and the birds spread over the trees to sing their sweet melodies with beautiful tones and cast banners of peace all over the safe village, some village youths gather early every morning in a particular place until the last of them arrives, before leaving in a procession to the city, where they will sell their load of

fruits and crops from their farms. And they have to leave early so as to arrive in the city at the appropriate time, particularly when delaying factors are probable and the necessary procedures should be taken. So in the dwindling darkness they move like ghosts behind their donkeys, which carry the goods they want to sell in the city. Before arriving at the donkey station, they go through an exhausting process of

unloading some donkeys, for the village lanes are too narrow for a donkey with a large load on both sides of its back to pass. Therefore, its owner has to force it through the pass like the one who wants to insert a camel through a needle's hole, and the donkey may feel the human being's injustice. Hence, it takes the opportunity to drop its load and run away ... far away, and does not go around anything, which delays their departure to the city, and who knows? Perhaps another donkey bolts, leaving its owner with nothing but to try to be patient, and in many cases the empty tin cans scattered in the village's narrow lanes result in such a delay when a donkey's hoof gets stuck in one of those empty cans, which hinders its progress; and his owner thinks his donkey has become obstinate because of laziness or indolence, so he showers it with a beating until he sees it limping ... he attends to the predicament his donkey has gotten involved in, so he tries to rescue it, murmuring, "There is neither might nor power but in Allah⁵."

If one does not succeed in getting a can off the donkey's hoof, then he asks for help from one of the caravan members, and the caravan might be late for this or many other reasons, so that their arrival to the city will be later than expected.

Today is like other hot summer days, and in this particular place, a group of village youths are gossiping, and in the summer everything stretches out due to the heat; even talking becomes lengthy gossip. From time to time a slight, refreshing, and pleasant breeze blows, and spots of sweat pour down the foreheads before being dried by hands that weave the dawn threads and make tomorrow, and hope inhabits the souls in a charge of spiritual and religious potency that fills the hearts ... hearts of all village inhabitants.

Finally, the last of their number, Hameed, arrives.

He has no reasonable apology for his lateness, so he finds it enough to yawn when one of them asks, "Why are you late, Hameed?"

And from the yawn, the friend understands that Hameed overslept.

The caravan trip begins.

The dawn is thinning a bit and the features of faces become clear little by little, and Hameed, as usual, appears optimistic and smiling; confidence makes a strong, hard entity out of him ... his moderately stout body ... his reasonable height, and his small, continuously moving eyes in their narrow sockets. His strides are powerful, slapping the ground, and swinging his heavy stick in one hand, while keeping the other hand on his donkey ... all this indicates one thing: Hameed is never defeated ... others in the caravan are not less powerful than he, yet they are less determined and less chivalrous. Hence, he among them is like the leader of a battalion who has helped the village environment in order to build the bodies of its strong people. And ruggedness is shared like a fashion that unifies the appearance of the battalion members ... the edge-torn, worn-out clothes ... the bare feet where skin has turned into a thick shoe impervious even to thorns despite their cracks. Donkeys carrying a lot of vegetables and fruits shake their heads up and down with each step they take, as if they are wondering about the meaning of this conversation among the farmers, and their

tails nervously move right and left, expressing the weight of their loads.

Jassim says, continuing his conversation, "You, Hameed, will marry this night ... and if I were in your shoes, I would not go to the city today."

Hameed responds with a fabricated regret, "And who is going to sell these crops?"

One of them answers, "Haven't I offered to do so?"

"You often have, but it will be a burden for you to add my things to yours to sell; all are tired enough, and I will not add to anyone more than they have."

Jassim says, "If I knew that this would be your lame excuse, I would not have let you come with us ... I could sell all your goods even if I stayed behind."

"Well, this is not the sole excuse, because I want to buy some things for me and my bride."

"This is reasonable talk," Jassim says, and then keeps silent as if to let his friend's thoughts fly far away.

Jassim and Hameed have been close friends since childhood; neighborhood unites their hearts, and friendship, with its extending spaciousness, colors their lives, though the past was not free from skirmishes that they had as wretched, innocent children, but these matters are gone, and they are part of the past; they are not mentioned anymore except for fun when there is time for sharing memories in a gathering of family and friends ... Each of them sticks to the other, the same as his shadow; they do not separate except in cases that require their separation after they agree on the place and time of the next meeting, though this is rare for their work is the same, their ideas are identical, and the environment, with its minute details, rarely differs from one to the other. And finally, the caravan arrives at the city.

In the same place where Hameed usually sits whenever he comes to the city ... he puts what he has of his farm's products, and not far away from him some members of the caravan spread their things while others go in all directions, to distant places according to what each has; the place is determined by the seller's commodity; his temper has nothing to do with the place he wants to sit in. And the notion of selling and buying is noisy, clamorous, like everything in the city.

When Hameed is almost finished selling his products, he makes an agreement with a customer to sell him all that is left of the different vegetables, provided that Hameed delivers them with his donkey to the customer's house. Hameed agrees to do so after the customer confirms that his house is not far from the souq⁶.

And as the customer walks in front of him, Hameed follows, taking hold of his donkey while trying to avoid bumping into the bodies of the many people who crowd the souq of the city, and as his mind sometimes roves the village, surprises await him this night; tonight the covering will be lifted and he will know a great secret he had no chance to know before; he will know the one whom he will marry after he becomes tired of imagining her ... her height ... her color ... her face ... everything about her ... in just a few hours he will know these things, and along with that he will know a lot. The bride here to some extent is similar to a watermelon:

you do not know whether it is ripe until everything is done, and you have no chance to go back on your word. He has heard a proverb, and he does not know its exact meaning, yet people repeat it: marriage is like a lottery ... one time you win and another you lose. What matters for him from this proverb or similar ones that he hears and does not know their exact meanings, but remembers with or without an occasion, though his mind realizes the words in the proverb relate to the occasion he uses it in? And as the time of his marriage approaches, the confusion and disturbance of his thinking increase and his mind becomes distracted.

Soon, when he finishes delivering what he has to the house of this dull customer, he will buy some fabric and gifts that will add happiness to his marriage, and of course he will not forget to stop at the jeweler's in order to pick up bracelets the jeweler promised to make for him last week, and which he will present as a gift to his bride. But why doesn't this dull customer want to stop walking? It seems his house is farther than he indicated, although there is no problem because the customer has promised to pay extra money for delivering what Hameed has to the house. The most important thing is that it does not take much time, because Jassim and the rest of the caravan members will be boiling with impatience for his return; they can't go back to the village without him, and Jassim already suggested that he accompany him after the former has sold everything he brought with him, but there is no need for that, so it has been enough for him to ask Jassim to buy some things that he may not be able to buy later, and they agree to meet at a spot both know. And at last the customer stops and turns back to Hameed and says, "This is my house; give me the vegetables and wait for me until I bring money."

And Hameed says nothing; he expects anything but that the customer would make a fool of him ... this door is for a mosque in which Hameed said his prayer once—he does not remember when—and this mosque has a door on the other side; he may be mistaken, but the doubt disturbs him ... this dwarf with a pig-like face can't dupe him.

His mind is busy thinking ahead; in spite of everything, his hands stretch to take the load down, and at last a thought occurs to him, and without showing any hesitation, he hands over the load to the short customer with a pig-like face, and says to him in order to carry out a plan, "I hope you bring the money without delay, because I am in a hurry."

"Soon ... I will come back with it soon ..."

Clearly this is a mosque, even if Hameed did not say his prayer in it before, because its minaret confirms that it is a mosque, and it is also obvious that this customer wants to trick him. It doesn't matter ... he will show him the result of his deed soon ... he will teach him a lesson that he will not forget.

When the customer disappears behind the door and closes it, Hameed moves quietly, after he has tied his donkey in

order to stay in the place ... he hurries until he arrives at the other door of the mosque, and awaits in ambush behind it for his prey.

His wait does not last long, for soon the door opens and the dwarf customer with a pig-like face comes out, but he does not recognize Hameed, who appears calm as if nothing took place, and it seems that he did not expect his trick to be discovered so easily, so he passes Hameed like he passes any person and says, "Peace be upon you."

And Hameed replies, "And peace, mercy, and blessings be upon you ..."

He knows his voice and turns back, the color of his face becoming yellow, and he looks like a corpse, and when Hameed faces him with his hard looks, he tries to throw the basket with what it contains and run away in order to flee the iron grip where one blow may kill him, but Hameed doesn't leave him any chance to flee. He pounces down and seizes him by the neck and his soul is about to surrender except for throat-rattled shouts which implore people to turn around and try to pry him off Hameed's grip, and when they increase in number and manage to let him go, he has already become unconscious, and the people's harsh looks are directed toward Hameed as if they are inquiring about the reason for what happened, and as long as he does not respond to their unspoken inquiry, he feels their discomfort grow, so he deafens his ears to what they are saying, and starts gathering the vegetables that have been scattered, and putting them back in their place. And when he intends to go to his donkey, a hand settles on his shoulder; that hand is none other than a hand of a cop who recently intervened after being called by one of the crowd, and who takes him to the police station to spend the night which he had expected to be the best night of his life.

Translator's Notes

- 1 KHALIL I. AL-FUZAI (1940-) is a literary writer from Saudi Arabia. In his writings, he introduced his culture, addressing many social, cultural, and religious issues he saw in his society.
- 2 This story was translated from the following Arabic source:
Al-Fuzai, Khalil I. *Thursday Fair*. (سوق الخميس). Taif: Taif Literary Club, 1979: 83-90.
- 3 ... Every now and then there are few dots found in the source text. I tried to be as close as possible to the original text through keeping names, some familiar words written in italics, and those dots.
- 4 An introduction a reader may need to connect the text to its context.
- 5 *Allah*: Muslims' god.
- 6 *souq*: a local, open marketplace.