

SALTED GRASSHOPPER

By Aziz Charhabil

Once upon a time, there was a remote village where the road disappears once strangers walk down it - so no one gets in or out because of a magic spell of a witch called Akessah who lived in the village and coerced its inhabitants. The inhabitants of the village were very afraid of her spells, for which she used absolute hardened demons.

In the same village, a kind woman named Al-Salha lived in a garden where springs burst, productivity increases, and flowers and fruits bloom. Al-Salha's garden was a source of sustenance for all the inhabitants of the village, except for Akessah, who hates Al-Salha and whose hate only increases when she feels the people's love for Al-Salha. Therefore, she did not spare any effort to harm Al-Salha and send her Jinn servants to burn the house of Al-Salha down and turn her garden into ashes. Luckily, all the attempts were doomed to fail because the care of God guarded Al-Salha and kept her safe from the gyp of Akessah and her servants.

Al-Salha was seven months pregnant when her husband died without showing symptoms of weakness. Everyone assumed that Akessah was behind the death of Al-Salha's husband, but no one dared to tell the truth fearing the witch. Akessah's hate for Al-Salha increased when she gave birth to twins with the beauty of a full moon, especially because Akessah was sterile. She decided to steal the twins and hide them away from the village and burn their mother's heart. It was the middle of the night and darkness dominated the place, when Akessah was walking out of the village after she stealthily sneaked into the house and stole the babies. With her departure, the road to the village became impassable after the jinn guarded and constantly changed its features to mislead the arrivals and prevent residents from leaving.

In the morning, Al-Salha discovered her two babies had disappeared, and she shouted loudly until all the villagers gathered and decided to unite to face Akessah. They hoped to end her control and break her force. Therefore, they carried their shovels and sticks and raided the house of the old witch. Unfortunately, they found the house was empty because Akessah ran away after successfully kidnapping the babies. Al-Salha felt the sorrow and pain tearing her heart. She turned to God

complaining about the injustice brought on her by the witch and asked him to bring back her children.

After a three-day march, Akessah arrived in a fishermen's tribe, where the inhabitants lived from fishing from the river that runs along the village. She chose a place among the trees where she set up her tent and settled. On the third day, the river's water level fell sharply, and the fish were so scarce that fishermen could only get a few amounts of fish a day which becomes inedible and smelled really bad once they left the river.

The fishermen gathered to discuss the curse that happened to them and ended up in the village's wise man tent who asked them. 'Since when did this start happening?'

'It started three days ago, sir,' one of them shouted.

Then someone else added, 'An old woman came to the village three days ago, she didn't leave her tent since then, the features of her face show cruelty and as soon as she assembled her tent near my house problems started arising.'

'It must be the old lady who brought the fatality to our village. We will not allow her to stay for another night. Give her some food and then take her out of the village,' the senator shouted angrily.

The fishermen gathered around the witch's tent and took her out of the village after they gave her enough food. Once again, the witch walked into the wood's tribe in the middle of the forest after a full day of walking. There, she set up her tent near the house of a logger who welcomed her and offered to help fix the tent but repelled him in silent terms reflected on her face, showing the years of cruelty she experienced engraving grooves on her chest. The tribe depended on the bounties of the forest of firewood and grass to make forage for livestock. Just like the village of fishermen, on the third day since the witch's arrival, the tribe saw the ripe grass dying, the death of young cattle and the scarcity of milk and cheese due to the insufficiency of feed.

The loggers detested the newcomer and considered her staying among them as a source of an evil omen hitting the tribe and those in it. They offered her food and then drove her out of the village, which came back to life once Akessah left.

Akessah rushed away from the wood's tribe to find herself at the gates of a large tribe after a one-day march. She was told that it was the tribe of Judge Boumedaft. The judge had a reputation throughout the region; he was known for his

fairness and wisdom and the breadth of his insight and intelligence. He also used a group of wise men to push injustice, bring justice and punishes wicked witches. After three days on the arrival of Akessah, the tensions intensified and the tribe queued in front of the Judge Boumedtah's house. The Judge received the chief merchant and the chief vegetable vendor who each presented their complaints.

The chief merchant said, 'Three days ago, we collected the money from the loggers and butchers and gave it to the vegetable vendors, but they didn't deliver the fruit and vegetables to the convoy leaving early in the morning.'

Then the chief vegetable vendor replied, 'The chief merchant is right, and we collected the vegetables and arranged it in the place we agreed before, but it disappeared without any trace.'

While rubbing his forehead, Judge Boumedtah ordered them to return tomorrow to deliver his verdict.

After the adversaries came out, it was the turn of the chief butcher and the chief peasant. 'Mr Judge, the farmer is holding my cattle and threatens to slaughter and eat it and refuses to return it to me.'

The chief butchers replied, 'Sir, his cattle attacked the peasant fields and corrupted the planting and ate the harvest. Who compensates us for our losses?'

As he did with the first two adversaries, the judge directed them to return tomorrow. He turned to his assistant, saying, 'What is the secret of this earthquake that upset the whole village?'

'Three days ago, an old woman carrying two babies came and settled down in the valley. No one spoke with her and she hasn't spoken to anyone, and I think she brought misfortune to the village. '

The judge never oppressed anyone, so he ordered to honourably bring the old woman to know her story.

As soon as she appeared before him, the judge felt the cruelty that the old woman was hiding behind her tears while she talked about the epidemic that engulfed her tribe and killed her family, so she had to go out with her babies to look for a place to settle, and she found a safe haven in the tribe of Judge Boumftah, known for his generosity and good manners.

The judge looked at the two babies, and the light shimmered their faces, while the face of the witch was grim and filled with wrinkles. And said, 'Listen, old lady, I

can't believe that these two children are yours, they don't look like you. Moreover, they are breastfeeding and you are old, your breast can not produce milk.'

'Are you questioning the power of God? They are the gift of God. Abraham and Zakaria (peace be upon them) have preceded me,' the witch Akessah answered.

The judge ordered to hold her until the next day and then summoned the starling bird and ordered him to travel to the faraway country and return with the truth of the woman before dawn. The starling bird flew and returned before dawn, carrying news of the witch Akessah and the mother Al-Salha and the ensuing events. By morning, the serenity had returned to the tribe and the adversaries reconciled and things returned to their former state. The judge summoned his wise friends to look at how to punish the witch Akessah. In their presence, the colour of her face changed and her voice rose and sought to charm everyone by using her magic stick. However, the wise men of Bomaftah locked her out with their talismans. The judge gave her the chance to choose what animal she would be transformed into: a fly, a frog, or a grasshopper. She chose to be the latter. The smile returned to the house of Al-Salha after Judge Boumedaft returned the babies to their mother's lap.

The grasshopper Akessah went into the desert and brought a swarm of grasshoppers to attack Al-Salha's garden. Fortunately, God's care transformed the taste of the orchard's plants and made them very salty, causing the grasshoppers to fall down in the garden, and making them a good prey for the people of the village. The young in the tribe filled their stomachs with salted grasshoppers and divided the remaining among them. After the division, they found a single grasshopper and decided to draw lots to see who would win it. The grasshopper Akessah tasted salty, whenever a child put it in his mouth, he threw it to the ground, leaving it aside until a strong wind blew it away from the village. Then the children started dancing and singing.

'O salty grasshopper, where have you been?

In Al-Salha's garden

What did you eat, what did you drink?

I only ate apples

Just take off your hands Judge Boumedaft.'