

THE SHEPHERD

By Abdelhakim Barnous

A little man inside a big car, that is what El-Hajj M. Touhami looked like, like a small ant leading a huge piece of iron. It seemed tempting, a large ship passes through the reefs of the mountain and whenever the road bends he turns the wheel. A spacious velvet saloon, dozens of buttons and a back pillow to relieve the pain in his waist.

At the right turn leading to Tazult, he is seduced by the temptation of grapes compressed under big wheels, and the sound of the Aita going up and down with the light lines on the dashboard. El-Hajj M. Touhami totally disconnected from the outside world. Across the glass he sees thistle trees pulling back.

Now El-Hajj Touhami is desperately turning around his solid Ka'bah, He exhales and stares at the technological equation before him without a single lesson of mechanics in his hollow head.

Hot and sweaty, his rounded head is feeling warm. He extends his hand to the isolated phone but there is no telephone network here, son of 'Derb Omar'. El-Hajj M. was completely separated from the outside world.

Discontent looks like a giant whale lying on the mountain beach, no movement and no sound.

A cacophony scenery, a mass of bright iron amid this wide range of dome grasses, serrated stone and fear rising to the neck. There is no harmony between the worlds at all.

Overloaded with large rumen, he quickly hastened to the trunk and sits on a chair in the middle of the weeds. He now looks like a filmmaker in this real movie scene. Five minutes later, a group of the Ogoleas inhabiting the mountain circle around him - about twenty houses made of mud dumped in this spot of which only God knows it exists. Cousins reproducing among themselves established this settlement beyond history and all censuses.

The little man was forced to smile, being tired of the Ogoleas circling around him, and around the white elephant crouching next to him. In the tenth minute, the leader of the settlement arrived and Mr Touhami was forced to speak first. With a broken Arabic, they discover the man's disaster and treat him after the tall man

wrapped in his burnouse¹ tells him, 'Forget about your *junk* and come drink a cup of tea and a crumb of bread and oil.'

The place is lonely and all people were strangers, the merchant was lost between obsession and tranquillity, rubbing his mouth to smile, having a deep feeling of pain and injustice. He descends between the grass and the heads of the serrated stones like saws, they carry him to prevent him from exploding like a white balloon.

He looks like an alien coming from another planet when he spread on the harsh ground. Looking from a hidden tip to the sharp heads of stones under the dome mat and to the bronchial frond propped with big sticks. A dark cellar during the day and a bottom of a well at night ignited the gas bottle placed in the window louver, after connecting its iron hose to a Chinese filament. It spread a little light which emanated El-Hajj Al-Arabi from his dreariness.

The leader of the folk said, 'You see, no water and no electricity. And a flea or even three will stamp on your skin, a welcome kiss, do not panic.'

El-Hajj Al-Arabi summoned his flimsy power and spoke, 'How do you manage your life here?'

We bring water from the spring, and we, serpents, frogs and scorpions drink from one place, and the nearest weekly market at a distance of two hours on the back of a mule whose hooves must be of iron.

The first round of tea took place, and the guest harmonised with his hosts. He admired this wondrous fluid, how they sip it and how it flows in their veins like an elixir. He cheered up and his tongue knot was dismantled, the experienced merchant with his cleft tongue began to speak, telling them that he is an old mountain lover and he is pleased with this simple living, which is almost like the lives of the prophets which the urban owners would fight us for it if they discovered it. He told them in what looked like a secret, that he lives with oppressive people in the city, and he will spend his retirement on top of a mountain, just like them.

His cleft tongue was heated and he went on dominating the speech, just as he does in his big shop. 'You know what life looks like there - he mistakenly pointed to the mountainside - it is monstrous and excoriated. We live... They live there (trying to distance himself from the charge of living in the city). We erode day by day, and

¹ A burnous also spelled "burnoose", "bournous" or "barnous", from the Berber abernus is a long cloak of coarse woollen fabric with a hood, usually white in color, worn by the Berbers and other Maghrebis.

agitation and anaesthesia tablets are our only weapon... their last weapon to live in that vast slaughterhouse. We die and live seventy times a day, and we do not know whether we are from the living or from the dead who are waiting for their final death... Here you are in a blessing that you know nothing about (it seemed that he believe himself).' He said his last word, and the butler poured the second cup and put it in front of him beside a rusty jug.

El-Hajj Al-Arabi is a merchant of goods and words, selling his goods by talking. He values everything and tempts people with everything. At the moment he tempts the people with their exile and adorns them with his words.

The leader interrupted him saying, 'We are isolated here, we have the mountain in front of us, and the valley below us. During the floods, we carry our pregnant females on the back of a coffin and walk in their funerals to the nearest pathway.'

The listener, in shock, stiffened up like a statue.

The speaker added, 'Then the lucky one buys a gas bottle with one hundred dirhams if he can afford it. When it heavily rains, the valley turns into a russet water carpet thirty meters wide, and we do not find an alternative but to ride Tamaadit' El-Hajj seemed surprised, and he knew something was missing, and the speaker hastened, 'It's a raft of goat skins. Blow it until it becomes like balls, stack it, and above it, we extend a weave of berry tree sticks. Even though, crossing to the other riverside may become a transit to the other world.'

The merchant, the lover of the mountains, was trapped and began to shrink on himself. The speaker continued, 'Behind the high mountain, to what looks like a school, our children are travelling every day. No one knows it exists, they spend their lives between going and coming back, until they grow up, we send them to you to build your buildings and guard you while asleep.'

With the second round of tea taking place, El-Hajj was completely silent. In the midst of the conversation, one of the boys had the courage and proceeded into the adult's room. **Standing next to the foreign man and close to the man preparing tea**, he peeked at El Hajj Touhami with strange looks and the merchant could not untie its mystery.

The speaker noticed as he embraces the boy to his side, apparently his son. He took the opportunity and said, 'Zayed, Amska, treasurer of our goats, cannot count to ten, but he counts our goats one by one...'

El-Hajj snatched a quick look at the boy, shocked by his dark cheeks and small hands, which were covered in a rough layer of dirt and dead skin. His hands looked like a small lizard covered in scales.

In the famous California neighbourhood, El-Hajj M. Touhami descends with great indignation in front of a wide yellow door and pushes a button to open it. The Day Guard with a semi-curved body salutes and mutters a prayer for him. He walks on a tile made from the Italian smooth alabaster. To the right is a large rectangular swimming pool, and to the left is a grassy land the size of a small football field. He enters a spacious dome with stained glass, glazed mirrors, crystal and red copper taps, which appears to be the bathroom. He goes up a small staircase and drowns his flabby body in the Jacuzzi and the overflowing water caresses his beard. He closes his eyes and relaxes his eyelids, then he sees the young child looking at him and smiling. And although he tries to fall asleep, the child with blue eyes keeps looking in his eyes.