

THE CITY OF EL J----

Maurice Rowdon.

Whenever we were together at the riverside restaurant the prince took me to the very back where we would be hidden.

I always wanted to sit behind the huge plate-glass window overlooking the street, with the yellow and eddying river of El J--- on the right, and the bridge with modern lamp-standards at intervals along the parapet; on the other side of the street, down steps, there was the solitary police guard, his bayonet shining above the heads of the passing robed crowds. I liked to sit at one of the tables immediately behind this window and watch the shoeshine boys opposite squatting on their stools, and the heavy, despairing face of the Kurdish shopkeeper who leaned over his tiny counter for hours on end staring into the street and the long cars, flashing under the lights, swift and almost silent as they passed.

Sometimes a tidy European or American would go by, fresh and bewildered from the airport, and with him would go a group of children, beggars and street-vendors, barefooted and quick, with artful, black eyes, who kept knocking against him and calling out in a strangely guttural whisper, so that the word seemed dangerous and secret, 'Sahib, sahib!'

But the prince told me this was shameful, to sit where we were on view, so we always went to the very back, where the bar was.

He used the word 'shame' more than anyone I knew in El J---. It was just as if he'd got thousands of retainers in the city, watching us from every corner and every shop, waiting for us to betray ourselves by drinking alcohol or talking with low-bred people from outside the city who never wore western clothes.

He was always saying, 'That man's a dog' or 'He's the son of a whore.' He would say, 'I'd like to take you to the house of Mohammed S---. But honour prevents me.' He would stop at the entrance of one of the cabaret-halls and snap his fingers at the waiters there, calling out to them in a deliberately bullying voice with mock curses, glowering down at them. Usually they were quite unexcited by his shouting, even amused, and they came smiling towards him; unless they were new to El J---. For most of them he was just a drunk, something of a bragger, rather pitiable; they knew that later on he would have to be helped out to his car, one man on either side of him while he swore and cleared the spit from the back of his throat and kicked about with his long legs.

Until roughly nine o'clock each evening the prince was a quiet, chuckling, chivalrous man. He loved his friends and listened to them with a kind of protective warmth and ease; if I was present when one of these friends was talking he would turn to me with a wink as if to say, 'You see what a fine fellow he is?' But he was terrified of being betrayed. Every friend was a possible source of betrayal. He called me his brother but again and again he stopped and touched my arm, in my own house or in the restaurant, or in one of the hotels he owned, and asked me, 'You are my brother, eh?' Then he would shake me, peering into my eyes and add, 'But truly?'

I spent many evenings with him, and my job as his friend was to see that he kept out of fights, that his wallet was never stolen and that he got back home safely, staggering between me and his chauffeur Ali, across the ditch in front of his house and up the cobbled path to the door where his wife was always waiting. Just before the hour of his return she would lock up all the bottles of arak, and the pistols. Sometimes he would rage back

to the house full of suspicions---that his wife was sleeping with somebody or that an enemy was waiting for him in the garden, to kill him. Then he would pull open all the cupboards and drink glass after glass of arak until he couldn't speak or stand up properly, then he'd take his revolver and shoot dozens of bullets through the window into the garden where he thought he could see a dark figure.

He'd introduced me to his wife, a young woman from Cairo. He told me this was a great privilege: most of his countrymen, who were 'lackeys', couldn't be trusted with her. All day, he said, they sat in the cafés dreaming about other men's wives, especially his, because she didn't wear the veil; they would murmur to each other, 'By God, I'd like to be laying my hands on the fat-and-beautiful thighs of the prince's wife!' He kept her confined to the house during the day and only allowed her a drive through the city at dusk, behind drawn curtains, with the chauffeur. He paid his servants to spy on her and every evening he required from his chauffeur an account of the route he had taken for his wife's tour; he then compared this account with that given him by the traffic-police, who knew every car that passed them. He said that once or twice the accounts had differed, and he intimated that his wife was also paying Ali, to give him a wrong account.

When he was drunk his easy warmth would disappear. He would spit on the floor or go in the street and pass water over the bonnet of someone else's car, roaring with laughter. In his own hotels he would grab at the serving girls and pinch them between their legs, under their skirts, so that they screamed, and call them daughters-of-pimps, and in the cabaret-halls he would make an odd offensive bawling noise whenever a woman came on the stage.

People gaped at us and sometimes sneered at him as he stumbled past, though he never saw that, especially as he thought they were bowing to him. The waiters were rude and cynical when they spoke to him; worse than that, they humoured him in a gentle, superior way. When he came into the hall his acquaintances moved as far away as possible. When he was sober he was terrified of losing face but a few seconds after his turning-point in the evening he would make up for it and more besides. He would go deliberately to places where they laughed at him, where he'd be most degraded; even his chauffeur tried to hold him back. He would pick the lowest brothel in town where the girls treated him like a clown.

His chauffeur Ali was a small, quiet man. He always wore dark glasses to hide the ugly effect of trachoma in one eye. One could only see his quiet smile, not the expression of his eyes. He knew every stage of these evenings-out by heart; first the restaurant, then the hotel, then the cabaret, then ~~the~~ in a last twilight descent the brothel. He often gave me a wise glance, and sometimes he and I were proud of being sober. The prince plunged headlong into the street and sometimes gave us a sudden look that seemed to say, 'Oh, yes, we're very worthy, aren't we, we sober people?' That glance made the shopkeepers from the north, the landlords and pot-bellied, roguish sheikhs look like priests when they smiled at him nervously in the cabaret-hall, trying to humour him and hush his voice when he called them buffaloes and male whores. If one of them tried to give him a helping hand as he staggered towards the doorway, he always pushed the hand away or kicked out with his legs, then called for me quietly, taking my arm with a soft movement in his, to show them that however drunk he was he could always tell a friend from a

lackey. In the car sometimes he would frown, his head in his hands, groaning slightly, and the agony of the night seemed to well up in him suddenly, and he saw himself clearly for a moment.

The next morning he was always silent and nervous, but never moody. He perfumed himself lavishly after his morning bath. Sometimes he sat down and wrote me a gentle note in a large round hand, apologising for having pissed on the doorstep of my house the night before, or having tried to put his hand under my wife's skirt.

Only in the north, at his country-house where the wind was always fresh and where there were green fields, was he quiet. He could go pig-hunting and shooting every day; there were no lackeys to scoff at him behind his back, no cabarets, no enticing films with their white-bosomed Western women, no whores, none of the dry, seeking air of the city. He had something of the clown, beaten and thrashed, haunted.

He was only the nephew of a prince, not really a prince himself. It was a polite title; other chieftains used it, lesser people than he. But in the city people smiled at the name and it was almost never used. Sometimes, in one of the yellow government-buildings that seemed to be made of clay, he would stand at the desk of a minor official and take his ironical bow quite seriously before signing his name, Prince Karim. He had a marvellous nobility of appearance, tall with a narrow, dark moustache and very light eyes. He was always dressed in well-cut European suits of pale cloth, and his stride was long and steady. He gave an impression of ease and agility; he had a way of moving his chin forwards and back as he walked, staring a little grimly ahead, and this made him look as if he were hunting something down, with a slow, prowling assurance. When we

walked together in they city he took my arm and shoood the beggars away, flattered that they should take him for European as well. He had a great awe for power. He watch the immense four-engined planes roar along the runway at the airport and say as they lifted up into the sky, 'Look, now, look there!'; making an odd little noise of wonderment like, 'Hai, hai, hai!'

When I took a house next to his he began sending me all sorts of gifts---bottles of wine from his country-house, live chickens and ducks, and newly-boiled rice. This was traditional in El J--- when you moved to a new house, but his gifts were unusually splendid. At the end of our first week there he sent Ali across to bring us to dinner, and he and his wife received us in their drawing room. I remember he built up the log-fire, for it was in the heart of the winter, and talked to us very soberly about politics and his country-house. But after he'd taken four glasses of arak he began swaying and suddenly shouted across to me with a lop-sided smile, 'You sleep with my wife, I sleep with yours, eh?'; and his wife, completely disgusted, jumped up and left the room with, 'Mais c'est une bête!' That was the only evening the prince and I had at home.

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There were three of us in charge of the irrigation project--- Marcelle and me, both European, and Nuri, who ~~had~~ was a native of El J---. My wife was also going to join the group, as a kind of extra secretary, but her hands were tied with the servants at home; the Indian cook was always drunk on the floor of the kitchen, and the maid spat on the floor whenever the Arab house-boy passed, and so forth.

I took care of the engineering side, working with the landlords, and Nuri, who had worked at the ministry of justice, took

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care of the legal and political aspects. The prince often came to my office, which was in one of the narrow, dark lanes dating from the Turkish occupation, behind the main street. He disliked it if Nuri the lawyer was there. He would bow slightly to him but say nothing.

Nuri was dark and rather plump, very dependable-looking, with a massive, thoughtful head. He was always quick to understand and answered at once. The prince was slow, and again and again he would ask, screwing up his face, 'What? What's that?' I remember Nuri most at the ministry, working over files with a dumb concentration, the sweat pouring out of his brow.

I call Marcelle a European but in fact she was brought up in Damascus, the daughter of French officials. She was both my secretary and my interpreter, and spoke the local Arabic fluently. She, Nuri and I worked together during the day, and sometimes spent the evening together, at one of the European-style restaurants or at my house.

Often the prince would ask me, giving me a side-glance, 'Well, what about this evening?' And when I told him there was work to discuss with Marcelle and Nuri he would nod and grunt, trying to look mysterious. When he was drunk he would sometimes grip hold of my jacket and cry out, 'Why is Nuri your friend?' And then, lolling helplessly in the back of the car, in a sudden fever of disgust, he would say under his breath, 'Marcelle is a ----', meaning to say 'whore', but the chauffeur would turn round angrily from the wheel and shout at him, 'La, la!' before he could get the word in.

n The prince admired her in silence, truthfully. He would never try to touch her if he came drunk to my house and she happened to be there. That wasn't honour. He simply sat,

in front of her raising and lowering his eyebrows ridiculously, not saying a word; suddenly he would smile brilliantly, and blow her a kiss, then the eye-brow raising would start again, while he swayed from side to side. She had something mysterious his other women hadn't got; it was in her movements, her quiet, dark, shrewd gaze; he called it European. His other women were never madonnas like her. She kept him in a silent spell. And she gave him the impression that she was completely beyond his grasp; not as my wife was beyond his grasp, because of honour, but through a personal quality; she hardly looked at him or spoke to him; she hardly noticed him. And this drew him on. He sent her gifts every day almost, and she hardly took the trouble to say thank you; sometimes she sent his servant back without a word. Or she would scrawl a thank you on some old notepaper, from the office. This was why he always asked where she was: because she showed him no respect. It was like a criticism from Europe.

I often noticed how she was watched in the street, when we were on the way from our office to the ministry. The women, their black abbas drawn together over their faces, would stand in the doorways whispering and staring, and the chauffeurs would lean over their wheels drowsily gazing at every part of her body as if it were meat. People called her the amazon, because she feared nothing. If an official advised her not to go through a certain district on foot she would go out of her way to do so.

As the heat grew my yearning for Europe grew, and my evenings with the prince tired me more and more. The city was beginning to frighten me a little, and I spent more time with Marcelle and Nuri than before; we had them to dinner alone and then sat drinking with them on one of the cool terraces. They often asked me, 'Why are you always with that Karim? He's brainless!' But

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I liked this brainless company, and found myself looking forward to it again without knowing why. He made me feel a sort of abandon. And the others were, so to speak, workers. They had no folly. There was the work, and then the relaxation from it in the evening, with cool, even talk.

As the heat grew, so the city seemed to become stranger. One day a sack was found by the police caught on the iron supports of a bridge not far from my house. It contained the body of a large man cut into tiny pieces. The murder had been done by his wife and her lover, after the man had gone to sleep. They had dragged the sack to the bridge and tried to throw it into the water; they heard no splash and didn't remember the iron supports below. This crime, reported in all the papers, haunted me for days afterwards.

For hours every week I seemed to be watching the prince's lips when they were loose with drink, trying to make words; or seeing him pull down the window of his car and spit; seeing him make a quick grab at a passing gypsy dancer in a cabaret-hall; watching him spill his white arak over the table and floor and me. I think he knew what an effort it was for me to remain polite; he knew it with the shrewdness of a drunkard.

But they were legendary evenings. His world was all angels and monsters, nothing in between. His moods were God's or the devil's, never quite on the earth. It made me want to avoid him and be with him, at the same time. He had nothing but his desires and hopes, no thoughts for the moment.

One evening, in the normal way, he asked me to come to the riverside restaurant for a few quiet hours. No drinking tonight; he'd had enough. That was always the story: we would eat some-

thing and go straight home. Of course. Sometimes he really did yearn to be quiet. When he came into my office and found me reading a book, quite still in my chair, he would look at me with narrowed eyes for a moment and say, 'Ah, I envy you.'

As usual he led me to the very back of the restaurant, near the bar from which the arak and the food were served. It was a bare place. The walls were white, the lights unshaded in long, blinding strips, and the tables and chairs were made of unpainted chromium. He asked me his usual question, 'Where do you think Marcelle is at this moment?', and as always I shrugged and said I didn't know, just to cover her, though I knew full well she was with Nuri. He chuckled and stared down at the table, drumming his fingers on it. Then he sighed and shook his head, and to console himself called for his first glass of arak.

'That son of a dog,' he said. 'How the devil can she like him?'

After we'd been drinking for nearly an hour under the naked lights he ordered food; he kept the waiter joking with him, calling him gently a buffalo and a son-of-a-pimp, then suddenly he leaned forward and dismissed him with a frown. He liked to do this sort of thing in restaurants, to show me that he was loved by the ordinary people, yet had the power as well. They did love his generosity; they weren't offended by his rudeness because there was something patriarchal and fabulous about it, nothing mean or personal.

'I know they're seeing each other,' he went on. He laid his hand flat on the table: 'They're lovers, aren't they?'

I shrugged again. He told me that he'd had his spies out, and that Marcelle and Nuri had had secret meetings, he knew it; every week they drove to an empty house in the desert. I

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didn't know this, did I? No, I said; which was true.

But at the same time he couldn't bring himself to believe his spies. 'They are together, aren't they?' he asked me again and again. He was so horrified by the idea that he tried to oblige me to contradict it. This I didn't do. He could see the truth in my eyes. And what disappointed him terribly was that I wasn't equally horrified; I didn't mind Marcelle being Nuri's lover. Whereas the prince found it absolutely natural and unquestionable that he should have first choice; but no one had come to him; Marcelle didn't even look at him, but gave herself to the son of a dog.

On any other evening I would have calmed him down, turned his mind to something else. But this evening I was helpless. I felt too ill to move. The heat, the blinding lights, the stench from the kitchen, and all the laughing and shouting round us, made me feel giddy and detached from him. I never gave him an answer, only shrugged again and again, almost falling asleep. The more silent I was the more he asked me, the more he drilled into me with his loose eyes. I could see how, only two feet away from me, he was beginning to mistrust me as if I were thousands of miles away. I felt I was actually becoming the betrayer he always feared. Well, the Arabs said that a friend was a thousand enemies. And I could do nothing about it; I felt bound and gagged by the noise and heat and the proximity of hot, pushing bodies, the steam rising from the electrical plates behind the bar, and the hurrying of waiters with filthy napkins. It was growing into a dream for me, crowned by the prince himself, who seemed huge, sitting in his chair like a throne, looming near and then drawing back, staring into my eyes and speaking more and more angrily. He banged the table, trying to get me to answer

him, but I simply shook my head and he gave up.

Through the blaring radio I could hear the call-to-prayer outside, like a screech in the night. I was sweating profusely, despite the fans, and my fingers were trembling for some reason. I closed my eyes several times and woke with a jump after a few seconds, sitting erect at the table. 'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I'll have to go home. I feel ill.'

At once all his usual daytime chivalry returned, and he clapped his hands for Ali, who came after a few minutes, shuffling along between the tables, having been called by one of the waiters. The prince told him to drive me back home and then return. That was that. I shook his hand, terrifically relieved, and went off behind Ali. I looked back as we passed the restaurant window, walking to the parking lot, and saw the prince lolling in his chair with other friends round him, snapping his fingers above his head in a kind of sitting dance as he often did when he was drunk.

We drove through the shoddy main street to the cool district outside, and the noise and lights fell behind us as we drew near the bridge where the awful crime had taken place. It made little impression on me, I was so relieved to be out of the restaurant and alone. There was a marvellous hush inside the car as it throbbed along. Al was leaning over the wheel humming. We turned the corner into the road where my house was and I noticed drowsily that ahead of us a small car was parked. It was outside my door. Ali turned and looked at me in the darkness. I didn't move. I felt he was about to ask me something strange.

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'Is that the ~~limousine~~ car?' I heard him say.

I was so surprised at this sort of question from Ali that I made him repeat it. And again he said, 'Is that Nuri the lawyer's car?'

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I was annoyed and said lazily, 'Perhaps!'

We came nearer and drew up just behind it; there was a light in the drawing room, and the curtains were closed. I told Ali, 'You may go back to the restaurant.' Then I watched him turn the car round and drive off again. Of course, in the drawing room I found Nuri and Marcelle with my wife, sitting under the fan talking. The dim russet light of the room made everything look wonderfully enclosed and hushed, and I felt happy to be there. I ruffled Nuri's hair with my hand as I passed and threw myself down on one of the divans. We began laughing and talking quietly in our usual way, my wife telling a witty, half-sad story about the servants; and after a time I felt well again, not even tired, without trembling fingers.

We were silent for a time, then suddenly we heard a car rumbling over the pot-holes in the road outside, recklessly, and for some reason my heart began beating fast as it approached, my body was tense and I held my breath, waiting for the car to stop outside our door. Marcelle started forward, too. We felt caught. The car did stop outside, and at once its doors opened and slammed to again. There were heavy and plundering footsteps on the gravel path and we heard the prince's voice, thick and high-pitched, calling out, 'Open up!' He began hammering on our door with his fist. He hammered three times, then paused, hammered three times and paused again, the noise echoing through the silent, stone-floored house. We sat quite still. Nuri looked at me, then at Marcelle. At last I got up and opened the front door. Seeming huge, the prince pushed past me, almost knocking me against the wall. And he staggered forward into the drawing room, followed by the quiet Ali, who gave me a quick, vengeful look. The prince was swaying about,

trying to make us out in the dim light. Also I noticed he was trembling and his expression was that of a hurt child.

Nuri got up at once, very calmly, and took hold of the prince's jacket, murmuring, 'quietly, quietly now.' It was strange to see them together, the prince like a huge bedraggled creature from the mountains ~~mountains~~ and at his side, hugging him, small, plump, dark, so much more collected, Nuri the lawyer.

'Why do you come here?' the prince asked him, intimately, looking close into his eyes. His lips were white and thin as he spoke.

Nuri, with an amused glance at Marcelle as if he were dealing with a clown, answered, 'I don't understand that!' At the same time he was disturbed and intimidated by the prince, and sweat was forming on his upper lip in tiny drops.

The prince pointed to Marcelle, 'Is that your whore now?'

Nuri looked up at once, his eyes suddenly alight. He clenched his fists over the prince's jacket and was just about to shake him violently when he lowered his arm again in a tired way. Then the prince began shouting furiously in quick Arabic which I couldn't understand. He shouted so that the veins stood out on his brow. Yet he didn't seem to be speaking directly to either Nuri or Marcelle. He was so stricken with rage that he looked like a puppet being shaken about thoughtlessly from above. I could see his knees quivering as he shouted, and his arms were jerking about loosely.

When he'd finished Nuri turned away from him with a shrug and walked close to Marcelle, murmuring, 'He says I defile you. That I'm not a prince. He says he'll shoot at my tyres if I bring my car this way again.' And while he spoke the prince nodded, breathing heavily, his shoulders bowed, as if to say,

Yes, yes, he knows very well the truth of what I'm saying!

We all watched Nuri go to the divan and take up his jacket in a sad way. He put it on slowly, then turned to me and said, 'It's better I go. See Marcelle home, please.' He walked past the prince and murmured to him, 'Do you always perform in front of your servants?'

'Servants!'

This was a terrific slight on his honour and in reply he simply turned round to Ali the chauffeur and gave him a staggering blow on the shoulder that sent him flying to the other side of the room---'That's what I give to servants!' And he added to Ali, who lay on the floor, 'Get out, son of a dog!'

Nuri walked past the cringing chauffeur, and the prince followed him out without a glance at Marcelle. We heard the lawyer's ~~car~~ car start ~~and~~ up and move away. There was some shouting outside in the garden, probably between the prince and Ali, then everything was silent for a time.

I went to the front door and was just about to close it when I heard a revolver-shot. I pushed the door quickly to and ran back into the room. I had the idea that he was going to attack the house, and, feeling the absurdity of it, I made my wife and Marcelle crouch down under the windows, as the safest place from flying bullets. There followed five more shots, and we could hear the prince's wife shouting inside the other house. My wife had her hands up to her cheeks, more frightened by the bangs than the danger, while Marcelle sat quite still on the floor, the sweat pouring out of her face.

When everything was silent again I went out into the dark roadway towards the prince's house and saw him standing in the porch, under the light, a great figure. His head was high, he

stood quite still, and he was staring into the darkness, quite calm now, like someone after an act of heroism.

'Who were you shooting at?' I asked quietly.

'Oh, the stars!'

'Not Nuri?'

He made a soft mocking noise, 'Pah!' He seemed to be thinking for a few moments, his head bowed, then he peered at me and whispered, 'Your friend!' He turned to go back into his house, but stopped suddenly. 'You weren't ill,' he said, 'oh, no, you weren't ill!'

He left me standing on the porch. I noticed he was still carrying his revolver, and after the door had closed I heard call out to Ali to bring down some blankets. I waited a few minutes. Then Ali came to the door with soft footsteps and bolted it slowly, making hardly a sound with the catch. The lights on the first floor went out, and the house was in utter silence.

I walked back to my own house, under the still sky, between the palm trees that never moved their leaves except on stormy nights. There seemed to stretch in front of me an extraordinary unfathomed silence, quite endless. I realised I was numb with shame, and felt completely estranged from the city of El J---. It took me a day of solitude, in my room upstairs, to find out what this shame was. I really did feel I'd chosen wrong. I'd chosen Nuri, whereas I should have chosen the clown. I belonged to the clown. And I should have made that clear at the beginning. The fact that I really had been ill that night had been forgotten.

A few days later a gentle note came, asking me and especially my wife for forgiveness. However, he said, he would still shoot

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at the lawyer's tyres. Honour demanded that.

~~John, 1953~~