

The City of Sheba

Al-Risala, 21 May 1934

The French man of letters Malraux was asleep as though awake, or awake as though asleep, and you will find nothing strange in that; for the sleep of accomplished writers is a form of waking, since it is filled with dreams that may possess, in truth and precision, in fruitfulness and productivity, a rank that reality itself often fails to attain. And the waking of writers is a form of sleep, for in it they are diverted from the possible, actual truths that surround them by whatever fills their heads of these fancies and illusions, which draw so near to their souls that they seem a part of them, and withdraw so far from their reach that they seem like the stars, which men marvel at for their nearness and covet and aspire toward, and grieve over for their distance, striving after them and taking delight in attaining them, and enduring, in reaching them, the fiercest effort and the most exhausting toil.

The French man of letters Malraux was, then, asleep as though awake, or awake as though asleep. He was in one of those sweet hours writers spend enjoying two hues of life at once: one mixed, turbulent, and pale — the hue of actual life — and the other clear, distinct, and radiant — the hue of that other life they live amid fancies and illusions. And there he was, so occupied, when a lovely woman appeared, dazzling in her beauty, exquisite in her loveliness, strangely dressed, the like of whom he had never seen among the beauties of Paris or the charmers of the other European cities he had visited, nor even among the images and pictures that hand down to people whatever ancient, medieval, and modern history has preserved of the features, forms, and dress of lovely women.

She would appear to him from afar, and no sooner did he see her than he lost sight of her, and no sooner did he think of her, after losing her, than she appeared to him anew; no sooner did he look at her than she vanished, and no sooner did he resume thinking of her than she showed herself again. And whenever she appeared to him, she filled the air around him with a fragrance and a scent the like of which he had never felt among all the perfumes, artificial and natural, the fragrance of gardens and the scent of forests, that he had ever known; and whenever she vanished, this fragrance departed with her, save for a faint remnant that lingered trembling in the air, like the faint remnant of a ray of hope. And so the soul of the French man of letters Malraux clung to this faint

remnant of fragrance, just as it was enraptured by this beautiful, splendid figure that appeared and vanished with the speed of a flash of lightning.

Now, had this apparition come, in this manner, to a man like you or like me while he slept, it would have woken him; or had it come to him while he was awake, it would have driven away from him every illusion and every fancy, and driven him into a violent, alert life bordering on madness. But it did not come to you, and it did not come to me; it came only to the French man of letters Malraux. And this man of letters possesses a bewitching power — so it seems — that enables him to resist the truth that wakes the sleeping, and to resist the illusion that lulls the wakeful to sleep, and to hold himself in a state between the two states, a station between the two stations; so that he is asleep as though awake, and awake as though asleep. This enchantment of his called to him, and the enchantment aided him in remaining upon the border between the two kingdoms: the kingdom of waking and the kingdom of sleep — the kingdom of false reality, in which people like you and me are caught up, and the kingdom of true fancy, in which writers and poets are caught up.

And he remained where he was, watching this jinniyah and breathing in her fragrance whenever she appeared to him, then clinging to whatever remained of her scent and losing himself in her image whenever she vanished from him; as though this jinniyah wished to toy with the writer for an hour of the day or an hour of the night — and how often do the jinn toy with the sons of men! But the French man of letters Malraux was possessed of such skill and cunning, such enchantment and tact, that he was able to toy in turn with this crafty, skilful jinniyah, and to compel her to reveal her secret to him and lift from between them the veils that separated them.

It seems most likely that the French man of letters Malraux learned this art, by which he seduces the jinn, from a simple sport — one our own writers and poets would do well to take up and practise themselves — the sport of fishing in rivers and streams. For this sport demands a patience long, very long indeed, and a tact and precision rarely demanded by other sports; the angler may linger on the bank of the stream for very many long hours, waiting for his catch, whether it comes to him or not, yet never, in any case, despairing.

The writer Malraux remained in this state of his, between the two states, and in this station of his, between the two kingdoms; and the jinniyah went on appearing to him, and he would welcome her, and

vanishing from him, and he would pursue her, until she grew weary of this patience of his, and vexed by this steadfastness of his, and despaired of ever startling him or toying with him; so she came to stand not far from him and fixed upon him a long, long stare, which, had she fixed it upon a man like you or like me, would have filled his heart with terror and driven him headlong into madness — but the French man of letters Malraux stood firm before her beautiful appearance and her long stare, gazing at her, smiling calmly, and saying nothing to her at all.

And she began to draw near to him, prolonging her gaze upon him, while he remained steady, unshaken, fixed, unmoving, until she stood close enough for confidential speech, and asked him, in a strange tongue whose sounds he had never once heard, yet whose meaning he understood just as he understood the meaning of French when it was spoken to him. She asked him, in this strange tongue, and with a smile no less strange than the tongue itself, saying:

“Who are you? I have appeared to many people like you across scores of centuries, and startled them thoroughly, across their differing generations and circumstances, and their varying degrees of knowledge and ignorance, of heedlessness and cleverness, until I came to take the startling of people as one of the easiest of pleasures, whenever I am free from the earnest labours that burden me with so much pain and toil. Tell me, who are you? There is no harm in your answering me in the French tongue, for I shall understand it from you, just as you now understand from me this Himyaritic tongue, which no one among the people speaks in these days, and which your scholars find hardship in reading and interpreting, and in deriving its rules and principles. Tell me, who are you, O youth whom I have failed to startle and to toy with?”

The French man of letters Malraux said, looking calmly and smilingly at this jinniyah:

“No — tell me, who are you? For it was not I who appeared to you, but you who appeared to me; it was not I who took notice of you, but you who took notice of me; it was not I who drew near to you, but you who drew near to me; and I did not attempt to bewitch you with a glance, a word, a movement, or a scent. It is not fitting, then, that you should question me, but rather that I should question you. And yet I did not question you, until you were the first to question me; and yet I am able, should I wish, to excuse you from answering, and to let you go your way; for many are those like you who appear to me, and many are the times I

have spoken with them and they with me! And though I should fail to know you, and to hear of your tidings, I have already known, before you, other visions, whose company I may resume whenever I wish, telling them of the tidings of the living, and hearing from them the tidings of the dead."

The jinniyah said — or the vision said:

"How overweening you are, you humans! You are weak, most vilely weak, and yet cunning turns your weakness into strength, your feebleness into might, and your ignorance into knowledge. Tell me, young man, who are you? Or else I am well able to do you harm."

He said:

"No — tell me, who are you? And know for certain that you have no power to do me the least harm; rather, I am able, should I wish, to shut the door between you and me, and to sever every bond between you and me. And what could be easier than for me to go off in this direction, and find myself in the kingdom of waking, where there is no illusion and no fancy — or in this other direction, and find myself in the kingdom of deep sleep, which dreams can neither approach nor find any path into?"

She said:

"I see you are, for all your strength, clever and skilful; you excel at conversation and know how to cut off every path for your opponents and interlocutors. I can only conclude that you are a jinni who has taken the form of a man, and I can only conclude that we might come to an agreement, and toy together with all mankind, plot against them all, and deceive them all, for an hour of the day, or a day of the week."

He said:

"No — whole months of a whole year, indeed a whole year of many long years; so tell me who you are, and I shall tell you who I am. And know, from this moment, that I detest startling people and toying with their minds; for the truly outstanding man is he who excels at toying with the minds of his contemporaries, and if he can, besides, toy with their imaginations, their hopes, their hands, and their pockets, then he is truly a man of genius. So tell me who you are, and I shall tell you who I am; for it seems to me that this hour may yet come to have some significance in the lives of men."

She said, smiling a broad smile:

"I think so too. Have you heard anything of the tale of that kingdom whose fame has filled the books of story and history?"

He said:

"Which kingdom do you mean? For how many are the kingdoms whose fame has filled the books of story, literature, and history!"

She said, with a touch of coquetry:

"And this scent that fills the air around you, which would nearly overwhelm you, were you not an exceptional man who knows no path to being overwhelmed — does it not tell you something?"

He said:

"Indeed it does! It tells me that you have journeyed by night from the East; for I have known no scent like it, save in the books of story and history. Might you not have come from the land of Yemen — that land of which the ancients and the moderns alike have spoken?"

She said:

"You have found me out — I am a jinniyah from the land of Yemen, come to toy with some of the people of the West, and to hunt down some prey for the jinn of Yemen; and I have caught you."

He said:

"No — rather, you have fallen into my hand. From which part of Yemen have you come?"

She said:

"From that great city once ruled by that great and ancient queen."

He said:

"The Queen of Sheba?"

She said:

"The very same!"

He said:

“And on what shall we agree?”

She said:

“That we toy with mankind a little, and then, afterward, grant them a fine compensation for this toying.”

Then the conversation between them continued, and broke off, and resumed once more, and broke off again; and then, one morning, people awoke to find that the French man of letters Malraux was passing through Cairo, in an aeroplane built expressly for him, and stayed in Cairo a day and part of another, then left it; and then, some days later, the telegraph flashed word that he had discovered the city of Sheba in less than nine hours! He had flown from Djibouti, crossed the sea, and pressed on until he reached the Empty Quarter; and his companion, the jinniyah, had gone before him and fixed him an appointment in that beautiful capital, and traced out for him, precisely and faithfully, the route he was to follow.

When he arrived at his appointed place, he photographed of the city whatever he photographed; he did not descend to the ground, but his jinniyah rose up to him instead, and showed him the most beautiful sights, and the ones most fitting to captivate people and bewitch their minds. Then he returned to Paris, the news having already outrun him there. And people were divided, over the whole affair, between doubt and certainty; so he wrote his articles, gave his lectures, and published some of his photographs; and the scholars, for their part, denied it all — and what is easier for scholars than denial? — while those who were not scholars believed it all — and what is easier for the unlearned than belief?

Then the news travels from Europe to America, crossing the ocean to reach it, and the New World is thrown into turmoil; and now the whole programme has been realised: people were astonished, then thrown into confusion, then convinced, then swept along, and so the toying began — first with minds, then with imagination, then with hands, then with pockets. And so, when November comes, the expedition will cross the ocean, and then cross the sea as well, and then set off into the desert. And how many remnants there are, in the southern Arabian desert, of ancient cities that people have known of, and cities they have not known of at all!

And who knows! Perhaps this jinniyah who appeared to the French man of letters Malraux will keep her promise and honour her pledge, and grant to the scholars who denied it and the unlearned who believed it an ancient city, rich in remains, that will fairly compensate them for the toying to which they are, in these days, subjected.

We ought not to begrudge writers this life of theirs, which they spend amid fancy and illusion, listening in it to the tales of jinn and demons, and pursuing in it their hopes and desires; for this life is delightful in itself, both to the writers themselves and to people when they hear its tidings. And it is, moreover, often fruitful and productive: it begins with dreaming, illusion, and hope, and ends in waking, truth, and certainty. We ought not to begrudge writers this life of theirs; rather, we ought to wish for our own writers and poets a life like it, filled with illusion, fancy, and hope, and filled too with vigour, earnestness, and labour, and with the patience to endure hardship, and to endure mockery and derision most of all.