

The Old Man of the Sea

Al-Balagh, 29 July 1945.

I scarcely remember the circumstances that drove Sindbad the Sailor to that remote island in the Indian Ocean, nor do I quite know whether it was love of trade, of profit, and of amassing wealth that exposed him to that terror, or whether it was love of travel, of exploration, and of roaming the lands and seas that laid him open to this misfortune.

But I see him alone on this island, not knowing how to sustain himself nor how to protect himself from mishap and misfortune, wandering before him, his heart gripped by sorrow, yet the fire of hope never quite dying within him; fear holds sway over him, yet he feels something of security too; dread very nearly destroys him, yet even so he looks up at the earth and sky, wishing to know what things and creatures surround him, going on his way, surrendering himself now to despair, now to hope. And a measure of composure and calm of mind had begun returning to him, for he had seen trees, and fruits, and flowers, and rivers, and told himself he had found a paradise in which he might dwell as long as God willed, until the days should open some relief from his distress, some way out of his straits, and until a ship should be raised up for him on the horizon, which he would see from afar, then see from near, whereupon he would unwind his turban and wave it in the air and send his voice as far as it could carry, calling and crying for help, so that the ship would come to rescue him from this solitude and bring him back, safe or afraid, to Basra, and from there to Baghdad.

And as he wandered among his trees, his flowers, his fruits, and his rivers, fearful and watchful, he suddenly saw a decrepit old man, worn down, upon whom old age had pressed every shade of misery, weakness, and ruin. This old man sat upon the bank of one of the rivers — or let us say, on the bank of one of the streams — unable to move or go anywhere. Sindbad saw him and was moved to pity, then looked at him long and was touched with tenderness, and was about to draw near to comfort him — but he was alone, capable of nothing, a man who thinks of no one but himself, absorbed in his own solitude, lost in this isolation to which he had been forced; he was free to go about his own business, to attend to his own worries, and to leave the old man to the misery and ruin, the weakness and helplessness, the exhaustion and dissolution in which he

found himself.

But the old man gestured to him feebly, insisting in his gesturing, calling to him in a mournful voice and words that could not be made out. And lo, pity took sole possession of Sindbad's heart, driving out self-interest entirely, and lo, he drew near to the wretched, despairing old man, gentle and compassionate toward him, asking after his condition — but the old man could not understand him, any more than he could understand the old man, and gesture came to stand between them in place of speech, and lo, the old man gestured to Sindbad to carry him upon his two shoulders and bear him across this stream he could not manage to cross on his own.

And Sindbad hesitated only briefly, then went to the old man — would that he had not! — and lifted him onto his shoulders — would that he had not! — and carried him across the stream — would that he had not done so! — and was about to set him back down on the ground, but alas! There was no way to do it any longer. For the old man had wound his legs around Sindbad's neck, and settled himself firmly into his seat, and come to rest upon his shoulders, and refused to budge from them... And every time Sindbad tried to set him down, he pressed his legs against his neck until he nearly choked him, then struck him with one foot or the other in one side or the other, driving him to walk and go on ahead, and preventing him from stopping or resting. And Sindbad had become no more than a beast of burden for this old man, and Sindbad's own will had fallen into this old man's hand, to be shaped and directed exactly as he pleased.

And so Sindbad goes on when he is ordered to go on, and stops when he is told to stop, the order being given to him now to go, now to stop, and he is powerless to refuse it or disobey it. Nor does the order come to him as an audible voice or intelligible speech, but rather as a pressure of the legs upon his neck, or a kick of the feet against his chest and sides.

And Sindbad gathers, for himself and for the old man, whatever fruit of these trees will feed them both; and if he wishes to sit down to rest, the old man does not permit him to do so unless he himself has some purpose in that sitting; and when night falls and Sindbad wishes to doze off, for a long while or a short one, the old man does not permit him to do so unless he himself has some purpose in it.

And even when he does permit him to sleep, he never leaves his shoulders, nor loosens his legs from around them, but keeps them wound firmly about his neck, so that if Sindbad's sleep runs long, he presses on his neck, or strikes his chest, or kicks one side or both.

And the old man may feel some need for a little dancing, or some need for a little singing, and there is no difficulty in that for him at all — it is merely a kick to the side, a jab to the chest, or a pressure on the neck, and lo, Sindbad dances, and dances on at length, or sings, and sings his very best!

And Sindbad had grown used to this life, and resigned himself to it, settling his mind to spend in it whatever days remained to him, unless some stroke of fortune should open before him a glimmer of hope by which he might escape — for he had despaired of ever escaping.

And one day Sindbad felt a longing for the wine of Baghdad, and so he gathered clusters of grapes and pressed them into a vessel — I no longer recall how he found this vessel or how he came to have it, for it has been a long time since I last read the voyages of Sindbad, as it has no doubt been for you too — but in any case he pressed the grapes and stored the juice away in a safe place, and went on wandering the old man about the island, stopping to go on and going on to stop, and so it went on for a day, and another day, and several days more. Then he returned to that vessel of his, and found the wine within it frothing and foaming, and lo, he set upon it and drank from it until he had slaked his thirst, and within moments it was coursing through his joints as recovery courses through sickness, in the words of Abu Nuwas, and lo, he broke into kinds of dancing the old man had never before seen, and brought forth varieties of song that fell most pleasantly upon the old man's ear, and the old man kept urging his mount on to more dancing, and urging his mount on to more singing, and Sindbad kept at it eagerly, delighting in it, and whenever he felt within himself some flagging or shortfall, he went back to that vessel of his and sipped a little from it, restoring to himself his mirth and his vigor.

The old man had wished to try this drink, and Sindbad understood as much from him, and had the matter been left to him, he would have grudged him the drink entirely — but it was a kick to the side, or a jab to the chest, or a pressure on the neck, and lo, Sindbad handed the vessel back up to the old man, who drank from it, and drank until he was sated, and lo, drunkenness crept into his joints as ants creep through a sand

dune, and coursed through his limbs as water courses through a moist branch. And both rider and ridden grew merry, and do not ask about the dancing, nor ask about the singing — but fortune had at last opened for Sindbad a glimmer of hope, and he took to drinking a little himself while plying the old man with more, until his joints grew slack, his strength dissolved, the pressure on the neck relaxed, and his feet no longer held firm around Sindbad's sides.

And whatever meager wits had been in the old man's head now deserted him entirely, and Sindbad's reins slipped from his grasp, and a light sleep crept through the old man's body and mind, growing heavier little by little, until, once Sindbad had the matter fully in hand, he sat down gently and skillfully cast off this hateful, heavy burden from himself, then rose, his affairs now entirely his own again, and looked upon the sleeping old man with a fierce look, filled with a hatred brimming with cruelty, then went to a huge boulder and lifted it in his arms with great effort, and hurled it upon the old man's head, crushing his skull, and committed himself to his Lord without a backward glance, until, having reached safety, he settled down to await the ship that would one day be raised up for him, and that he would summon with his voice and his turban to carry him to Basra, and from there to Baghdad.

I do not know whether the Saadists remember this story or not, for many of them have doubtless read it in their boyhood, as we all read the Thousand and One Nights in boyhood and forget it in manhood and youth. But this story of Sindbad is a faithful parable for the course of the Saadist Party's dealings with another party that shares with it both Parliament and government, just as the old man of the sea shared with Sindbad that island of his, and whatever trees, flowers, fruits, and rivers it held.

The Saadist Party had been roaming through certain of its horizons, seeking election, seeking a seat in Parliament, seeking a share of government. And this roaming brought it, one day this past year, to that island, and it looked about and found itself alone, and so it went on roaming the island as it had once roamed the sea, with a great deal of fear within it that it might never reach government, nor be capable of holding it, and a great deal of dread within it that government might elude it after such long striving and such heavy effort, and something of hope within it that a ship might yet be raised up for it on some horizon — and as it went on wandering among the trees and the rivers, lo, there was a small, frail party, which, but for its voice, no one would have noticed at all — as al-Mutanabbi says — sitting worn-out on the bank of the stream,

clothed in distress and wretchedness and misery, overwhelmed by hardship; and the Saadist Party was moved to pity for it, and drew near, until it lifted it onto its own shoulders and carried it across the stream, light and vigorous — only to find, from that time to this, no way of freeing itself from it, for it had wound its legs around its neck, and readied its feet for jabs to the chest and kicks to the sides.

And our modern Sindbad goes on before him, bearing this heavy burden upon his shoulders, stopping to go on and going on to stop, forced into every variety of dancing and every manner of song, while the old man sits fixed in his place upon those two sturdy shoulders, wanting neither to shift from them nor to climb down from them, and our modern Sindbad is weary of his burden, and weary of his life, and weary of everything, yet he cannot free himself from the old man of the sea; for the legs are wound tightly about his neck, and the feet stand ever ready for kicks and jabs, and the world grows dark at times, as though black night had engulfed it entirely, and bright again at other times, as though the sun had poured out upon it all its light — yet Sindbad remains weighed down by his burden, not knowing how to lighten it, finding no escape for himself from its pressure, its kicks, and its jabs.

And there is no difference between our modern Sindbad and Sindbad the Sailor except in two respects. The first: that Sindbad the Sailor was alone with the old man of the sea, wretched beneath his burden, solitary and friendless, with none to laugh at him or pity him but the island's own trees, fruits, flowers, and rivers; whereas our modern Sindbad has millions of Egyptians and millions of easterners around him, watching him and taking pity on him, and perhaps laughing at him too, a bitter laugh. The second: that Sindbad the Sailor was a man of mirth and revelry, of broad cunning and resourceful ingenuity in extricating himself from predicaments, so that when his soul longed for the wine of Baghdad, he knew how to age it, how to use it first to bear his hardship, and how to use it afterward to free himself from that very hardship, and how to cast the old man from his shoulders and return safely and soundly to Baghdad.

As for our modern Sindbad, he is scrupulous and austere, loving neither the wine of Cairo nor the wine of Baghdad, but loving only carob drink and licorice water instead; nor, besides, is he resourceful, nor skilled at overcoming obstacles, surmounting difficulties, and finding his way out of problems.

And so the old man will remain upon his shoulders, his neck will go on being sated with pressure, his chest with jabs, and his sides with kicks, until God opens for him some door of relief, and someone among those others now watching him — pitying him at times, mocking him at others — takes it upon himself to rescue him from this misfortune, lift this heavy burden from his shoulders, and restore to him his freedom to go down to the seashore and await the ship that will rise on the horizon, which he will summon with his voice and his turban to carry him to Basra, and from there to Baghdad.

Will his rescue be accomplished today?! Will it be accomplished tomorrow?! Will God's decree keep him long in this torment, or will it be brief?! That knowledge rests with God and with those firmly grounded in knowledge — and these, as you well know, are few.