LONGING BY MAHMÜD TAYMÜR

Translation

Mr. Kassab Effendi was a manager on the Shiyakhat estate where he was born. His father was a fellah, and he grew up in the fields from his earliest childhood. All he knew of the world was farming. He began life as a foreman in charge of the field workers, showed outstanding skill and effort in the work entrusted to him, and was promoted to the job of storeman, then assistant manager, then manager. That is as far as any fellah can hope to rise. He was illiterate but quick-witted, with a phenomenal memory, and could manage the business of the estate as well as the best qualified educated man. All his life he remained a fellah heart and soul. You had only to sit with him for a while listening to his deep, ringing voice and watching his sparkling eyes for everything about the country to show itself to you, the vast countryside with its blazing sun and spreading shade, its scorching air and mild breeze, its quiet pools and wailing water-wheels, the lowing of its cattle and the songs of its fellahaen.

He had a simple home no bigger and no grander than those of the other fellahaen. His father had lived in it before him, he himself had grown up in it, and so had his own children. He had no desire to change it, and lived in it as though it were a great palace. He received a wage of no more than five pounds, but what a wage that was! What was there to spend it on? He had everything. The water-buffalo grazed costing him nothing, the house was bursting with fowl, and his small garden beside the canal provided him with all the fresh vegetables he wanted. Some of his children had died, and his wife had followed them, but his spirit had not changed and his dedication not weakened. He was a man of joy and labour. This broad land he looked on as his own, and these cattle that filled the pens and covered the pastures he thought of as his own property, indeed he secretly felt for them the love of fathers for their sons. He spent his whole day going about the fields watching the fellahaen as they ploughed and sowed, sometimes taking over the plough from one of them and starting to plough carefully, his eyes shining, his chest rising and falling. Or he would take hold of the mattock and attack the earth with it vigorously and intently, then raise his head, look about him and say,

"What do you say, men? It's hard ground, but it's met its match!"
Then he would swap jokes with the fellaheen, and roar with laughter as innocently as a child. But if he saw any slacking from anyone he was a tyrant striking terror into men’s hearts. How could he put up with slacking at work, when work was the spirit from which he drew life?

At mid-day they would bring him the same large, flat loaves of bread, onions and fermented cheese that the ordinary fellaheen had, and he would sit in the same circle with them, eating and talking just like one of them. But as soon as the meal was finished Kassab Effendi would be up shouting at the top of his voice,

‘‘Back to work, men!’’

The fellaheen would start work again, toiling like giants, the man’s voice sounding amongst them like thunder.

In the evening, when Kassab Effendi returned to the estate village, his face a picture of happiness and contentment as he wiped the streaming sweat from his brow with his sleeve, he would go straight away to the cattle pen. There he would find the animals lined up at their mangers, their heads down as they ate greedily, the only sound that of grinding and chewing and their irregular breathing. Then as the man went in the animals’ heads would rise from the mangers, and they would look at him with shining, welcoming eyes as they went on chewing whatever fodder they had left in their mouths, polishing their already shiny noses with their tongues as though they wanted to look their best for him. One of them would suddenly give voice to a long drawn out bellow, deliberately sticking out its ears and staring at the man, and in an instant the whole pen would echo with the clamour of these simple good natured beasts as they burst enthusiastically into cry, everyone trying to outdo the others and gain for itself its master’s affection, until Kassab Effendi shouted in his powerful voice,

‘‘What’s all this noise?’’

The animals would at once fall silent, except for a donkey that had not yet said its piece in welcome. Kassab would glance at it sharply, and say,

‘‘You’re a donkey all right!’’

The donkey would lower its head to the manger again grumbling to itself, while Kassab Effendi walked past the animals one by one, stroking one on the back and caressing the head of another, teasing yet another with a joke only he and his herd understood. He shared his affection equally amongst them, favouring none, and if he felt he had been too attentive to one of them he quickly moved away, stealing a glance at the rest for fear he had provoked some jealousy.

When he returned home he would collapse exhausted on the mud-brick bench, yet with a smile on his face. Umm el-Hana, his only servant, an old woman who had been his nursemaid and his children’s