

Village Small Talk

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Translated by Catherine Cobham

My friend asked me to visit his village with him so that we could spend Friday in the heart of the country, and he could see to some of his estate business. So we went and found beauty and joy there. But that lush radiance which charms the city-dweller in the never-ending expanses of the countryside, and that pleasure which suffuses his whole being when he sees nature glowing joyfully at him wherever he turns his face, was tainted for me by the pity I felt for the peasants. The men were half-naked and worked the earth with hoes and scythes, bent double, clearly exhausted, pouring with sweat in the blazing heat. The women squatted submissively in front of their reed and mud huts and as we walked along the narrow, twisting lanes looking down at them, they seemed to melt into one another, veiling themselves from us with their tattered rags, which were as thick with dust as the ground at their feet. The small children, half-naked like their fathers, grubby like their mothers, grazed with the goats and chickens in the winding alleys, or on dusthills and around the stagnant pond nearby.

I started telling my friend how uncomfortable I felt, but he obviously did not share my sentiments. On the contrary, he began trying to convince me that this was the most suitable way of life for these people, that they themselves saw nothing wrong with it, and he quoted from his own experiences to demonstrate that beneath their primitive exteriors lurked the treachery of wolves and the cunning of foxes. Then he proceeded to make fun of my poetic sensibilities and my naivety.

When evening approached and the fields were bathed in the calm, sad splendour of dusk my poetic sensibilities - as my friend called them - got the better of me, and I felt profoundly depressed. We were walking down a dusty path between rows of maize plants. The shadows were lengthening and silence engulfed us, broken from time to time by the soft tread of oxen wandering indolently homewards, or peasants greeting us lackadaisically as they made their weary way in from the fields. We remained silent, and I thought about these people passing by.

What sort of conversation would they have with their wives when they reached home? Did they really not notice the hardship and poverty in their lives? Where did they find happiness and consolation?

I was unable to work out any satisfactory answers and unwilling to ask my friend. We were on our way to the little open-air mosque and by the time we reached it, the twilight had faded and the world was in darkness. The mosque was a piece of ground on the canal bank, carpeted with reed matting and enclosed by a low brick wall, mid-back height on those sitting propped against it. Here the men from the village gathered in the evenings to pray and chat. They rose to greet us and only sat down again when we indicated that they should do so. After my friend had given directions to someone who was concerned about his duties on the estate, a strained silence fell, broken only by their continuing expressions of welcome to us. I murmured to my friend that we had perhaps interrupted their conversation.

"What could they have been saying of any conceivable importance?" he retorted in English.

Then one of them suggested that Sheikh Muhsin should be sent for and an emissary hurried off to find him. We were informed that the man in question was the ma'zun, chief legal official of the village, and the most suitable interlocutor for people like us. Then all were silent, until the awaited guest arrived, preceded by the messenger holding up a paraffin lamp in whose glow you could see that the sheikh had cut his moustache but let his beard grow freely, that he wore a red turban and, believe it or not, a red robe to match.

The sheikh certainly knew why he had been summoned. As soon as he had settled down and the introductions were completed, he broke into a long, expansive discourse. The first part of this consisted of him telling us how he had just been with the local mayor and the government deputy, enlightening them as to how they should proceed in trying the case of one 'Abd al-Sam'. In the middle section he informed us that he had been a student at Al-Azhar for a number of years, and in the conclusion gave us a disquisition on a calico factory set up by Mu'ammad 'Ali Pasha. Then he swayed gently in his place, preening himself, while his audience shot glances in our direction which plainly said, "Could you give a speech like that?"

The crescent moon had climbed up the sky and the still water received its pale light like a tender mother taking a sick child in her arms. By a distant fire a reed pipe started up a plaintive lament. I was captivated by the magic of the surroundings and temporarily ignored those around me. My friend roused me, and there was the sheikh immersed in an

explication of some verses of the Qur'an, wringing the meaning out of them, so that their spirituality was utterly lost, and using his interpretation as a balm which dropped on his listeners' hearts and left them unscathed.

This was hard for me to bear and my friend, noticing my obvious disquiet, whispered that it would do no good to intervene. I ignored his advice and, as gently as I could, set about opposing the hero of the gathering. He resisted my arguments stubbornly, resorting to myths and fabrications which afforded my friend much surreptitious mirth, although he refused to be drawn into the discussion. At this I no longer held back. Determined to disprove the sheikh's lies and destroy his empty debating points, I waited until I noticed him wavering in his argument and jumped in, seizing the opportunity to discuss the peasants' living conditions. I spoke openly to them about their miserable situation and their harsh way of life, mentioned their children, their wives, their primitive housing, and outlined the way they could change their lives for the better if they wanted to. Then I elaborated on the subject of free will combined with action, explaining that they could accomplish miracles if they became conscious of their existence and resolved to justify it.

I talked passionately, my voice trembling with emotion, calculating that by addressing such a sensitive area, I would find a way to their hearts without any trouble. However, each time I paused to see what effect I was having, I found them open-mouthed in dumb amazement, looking from me to their mentor, as if they would have liked to ask for an explanation of my behaviour. As I thundered along, carried away in a frenzy of enthusiasm, I caught sight of two members of my audience, their heads close together, whispering to one another and not paying me the slightest attention. I was torn by conflicting emotions.

"How stupid you are!" a voice inside me cried. "You're tiring your lungs for nothing. They'll never understand you because you're an outsider, an interloper."

I gave in, and brought my speech to a premature close. The moment I finished, one of the two who had been whispering spoke out.

"Tell us then, Master-did the mayor testify for 'Abd al-Sami' or against him?"

Then the whole gathering erupted into a babble of noisy remarks on the same subject and I ceased to exist along with my words. My friend was

visibly embarrassed by me and we avoided each other's eyes for some time. The sheikh remained silent until calm had returned.

"God forgive me," he murmured, then turned to address his audience in grand style.

"Disasters befall us, yet we do not weep. This failure to weep is the result of eyes that are like stones. Such eyes come from a hard heart, which is caused by an abundance of sins. An abundance of sins is the result of an excess of hope, which in turn is the product of a love of the material world. The source of such a love is the will. That is, the idea that the will of man, the created one, is everything and the will of the Creator, Almighty God, is nothing."

He swivelled his eyes around his listeners and they bowed their heads and sucked in the corners of their mouths to show their distress and anguish. My friend looked at me.

"This is their man," he said in a low voice. "You invaded their minds and they didn't understand you. But he spoke to their hearts. And that's the kind of people they are, as you see."

The crescent moon had sunk close to the blazing fire and turned red in its glow, as if it was burning fiercely. It was an extraordinary spectacle and my eyes were instinctively drawn to it, but my ears were focused on the speaker, who had begun to take my speech to pieces.

"This gentleman, people, has led us to consider a fine concept, that is, the will, in the sense that if one wants something, all one has to do is to say "Be" and it will be."

I shuddered at this unpalatable sarcasm and the ridiculous misconstruction of my arguments, and bit my lip in an attempt to master my feelings and suppress the obscenities I was on the point of hurling at this bearded miscreant. My friend pressed me on the leg and whispered, "You may not have the chance of seeing anything like this again in your life, so why don't you keep quiet and listen." I did as I was told. The sheikh was haranguing those around him.

"Which of you would not like to be a village mayor?" he shouted. A skinny peasant with narrow slits of eyes interrupted.

"Or even a pasha!" he said, chasing away a mosquito from his face. All those who understood that this interjection made no sense laughed heartily. Sheikh Muhsin, stony-faced, retrieved the situation and went on.

"No, no. We're mistaken. The gentleman here stipulates action together with the exercise of the individual will. Let us say straight away that 'Abd al-Sami' pursued this course. And how unfortunate that turned out to be!"

A chorus of voices: "God be merciful to him! God help him!" The man with small eyes straightened up, raised his hands heavenwards and prayed fervently.

"O God, preserve us from the evil in ourselves, and from the Devil's wicked work. O, Lord!"

What he was really doing with this earnest prayer was banishing from his mind the spectre of the spiteful trick he had played against the owner of the field next to his.

The sheikh began to relate the story of 'Abd al-Sami' especially for our benefit, and at the same time the frogs started up somewhere in the distance, providing a kind of orchestral accompaniment to his tale.

"This 'Abd al-Sami' was - if I might mention it - a cobbler, living always on the backs of those whose shoes he patched. (He laughed at his own joke and there were gales of laughter on all sides.) But he was not satisfied with his lot. He decided of his own free will (here he brought his hands together with a vigorous smack to emphasise the word) to raise himself to a station not ordained for him in eternity." A voice: "The ancients said, 'Greed debases the greedy.'" "God led him on - for God is the most skilful deviser of stratagems to defeat his enemies. God sent 'Abd al-Sami' the assistant prosecutor - one of those young men who have traded the next world for this. He appointed 'Abd al-Sami' as his personal doorkeeper at work, welcomed him into his home, heaped material comforts upon him. 'Abd al-Sami' became a city-dweller, wore a jacket and tarboosh and walked around exulting at his good fortune, even though the Almighty has said, 'Walk not triumphantly in the land, for you will never cleave the earth, nor equal the mountains in stature.'" "

Voices wove together saying, "Glory be to Him who spoke these words." These were followed by sighs of appreciation, and some of them turned

to look at us, eyes shining in admiration at the eloquence of the speaker, while others bowed their heads until their faces almost touched the ground and the rest exchanged glances, waving the mosquitoes away from their noses

The sheikh gathered the skirts of his robe around him, adjusted his turban and inserted his fingers into his beard in a manner which suggested that he was ready to move on to a significant point in his story. A brief silence descended. The melodies of the distant flute stirred vaguely like a gentle breeze, endless, sad.

"The new job and the life of ease were not aimed at 'Abd al-Sami', but in fact - and God forgive me for what I'm about to say - at his wife. Despite being poor, she is extremely beautiful, as you know, and the assistant prosecutor had often noticed her at her husband's side when he was patching sandals for him. He convinced the husband that it would be a good idea to bring her with him when he came to work for him permanently. Then he could keep an eye on her and she could do the housework, seeing that he himself was a bachelor. The master had his way, but did 'Abd al-Sami's' efforts really do him any good? Absolutely not. After a while, God began to fill his head with overwhelming doubts.."

"God preserve us!"

"..and worry got the better of him."

"God protect us!"

"He became unable to enjoy life, and his peace of mind was destroyed." The sheikh paused to let his listeners express their reactions as they fancied. He reached for a round earthenware pitcher of water and began to drink from it, making the loudest, most irritating noise possible. The moment he finished, the man sitting next to him hurried to take the pitcher from him and return it to its place, while Sheikh Muhsin drew a large handkerchief from his pocket, a quarter of which would have made a fair-sized one, belched, asked God's forgiveness, then wiped his mouth, murmuring, "Thanks be to God."

When he had replaced his handkerchief and played with his beard to his heart's content, he continued talking.

"How could he have any peace of mind, when one thing naturally led to another? I fear I've gone for too long, gentlemen. [This remark was directed at us and we answered it as best we could.] The wretched cobbler's wife who used to sing at saint's day celebrations and receive alms-goodness me, goodness me-became a lady, saying what should and shouldn't be done. And the only person she could find to lord it over was her husband. [Sounds of distress, amazement, anger.] If ever he rebuked her, she would rush to her master, weeping and wailing, and he in turn would rebuke the husband and accuse him of being a peasant with no notion of a woman's worth."

"There is no power or strength save with God!" murmured the voices disapprovingly.

"The poor man often complained to me about his situation, and I advised him to leave what was not his and return to the life he was fitted for.

"But he was like a drowning man and continued down the same path until there was no room for doubt. Then he began to be tormented by raging fires of jealousy. He was distraught, continuously unhappy, took no pleasure in life and found no escape from his trials in sleep. All the same, he was incapable of extracting himself from this purgatory.

One: it was hard for him to give up the easy life laid on for him.
"Two: Satan was playing with his mind, so every time he resolved to change things, he developed a fixation that he really was just a peasant, and that urban life was like this. Then he calmed down and gave up the struggle."

Voices: "God damn urban life, and the day we ever heard of it."
"Things went on as they were until that dreadful night when the assistant prosecutor asked 'Abd al-Sami' to take a message to the mayor-here-and to bring him the reply, not straight away, but the next morning."

At this point one of the audience remarked suddenly, "Very odd," in a long drawn-out, humorous tone, clowning around, and the rest laughed briefly.

Then the sheikh lowered his voice to a deep, thrilling pitch and told his audience that what they were about to hear was secret information which the examining magistrates had given him access to because of his

high standing in their eyes, and because of the confidence they had in him. He requested them to keep it to themselves, and they nodded eagerly. At that moment one of them decided to adjust the lamp-it had been placed in the centre of the circle and squadrons of mosquitoes hovered over it and swooped down around it in frenzied attacks-and the rest chided him for his lack of manners when the teacher was talking.

"'Abd al-Sami' made his way along the railway embankment, thinking about the state of his life, his heart full of doubt. The moon lit his path and as he went along he noticed, lying between the rails, a piece of iron as long as a man's arm-I've seen it with my own eyes. He picked it up and the moment he discovered how heavy it was, he was seized by a desire to return. The poor wretch claims he tried to conquer this desire without success: it was as if the invisible hand of the Almighty was pulling him backwards. He finally gave in, returned and found the house in darkness. He opened the doors warily, one by one, until he came to his master's room, and there he saw-God forbid-he saw his master in ... the husband's place ... with his own wife."

The gathering erupted once more, this time with noises of disapproval and disgust and countless appeals to God. Sheikh Muhsin took the opportunity provided by this uproar to repeat his welcome to us. He would have liked to add, "Am I not an eloquent speaker?"

Once calm was restored, he continued.

"The two of them were asleep when he went in, and he could not restrain himself from bringing the iron bar crashing down on their skulls. They died at once."

Approving noises.

"However, he did not stop there. The desire for revenge was still burning fiercely in him, and he beat their heads to a pulp. The examining magistrates actually found pieces of brain ... of brain, Heaven forbid, sticking to the wall." Noises of approval and disgust at the same time.

The gathering went quiet for a spell. The croaking of the frogs was the only sound in the still air, since the reed flute's lament had long since died away. The strangest thing was that, once his thirst for revenge was satisfied, he

fetches the utensils he needed to make tea and sat up with the corpses for the remainder of the night, drinking tea and smoking."

"What kind of monstrosity are we talking about?" demanded my friend, aghast. To my astonishment, I heard myself saying, "I wish I could have been with them that night."

The gathering echoed to expressions of horror. "At dawn," continued the sheikh, "'Abd al-Sami' took the piece of iron, went to the police and made a clean breast of all that had happened."

Once again the sheikh reached for the water jar and drank from it in the same manner as before.

Then he said, "And so, my sons, life on earth is about worship, not free will, and the best way is always God's way."

He prepared to leave, claiming that the mayor and many of the notables were expecting him. The peasants went up to him one by one to kiss his hand, contented and at ease, thanking God that through His grace they were protected from scandal.

We preferred to stay behind, my friend and I, and so they left the lantern, happy to follow their teacher into the darkness.

Cairo 1929