

In the Rawdh
Palace, among
that fabulous
throng of old and
young, amidst
the carnival of
languages and
skin colours

unlike any other in the world, Prince Fanar and Princess Mudi were lost. Had it not been for some of the old palace attendants, they would never have found a place to sleep or in which to keep the few things they had brought with them from Ain Fadda.

The palace was something of a marvel: dozens of wings and suites opening onto one another. Along with sides were the

guards' and servants' quarters. In the centre stood the two-story main building, occupied by the Sultan and his three closest wives, with balconies overlooking the great hall on one side, and contiguous buildings on the other two sides. Most of these had been put up recently. The fourth, southern side, overlooked the horse stables.

No one knew exactly who controlled the palace or how it was run, for in spite of its great number of officers and administrators, the place's main features were its noise, commotion and chaos. The oldest palace residents had first choice of accommodation, furniture and even food, not because of any formal decision or agreement, but because this way imposed itself through habit and precedent. The same distinction held for the short-term guests in the east wings, which were divided from the interior by a high wall. Newcomers who came to live in the palace met with no end of trouble, for in spite of the Sultan's orders, which were generally indirect anyway, by way of Dughaim al-Sarhud or one of the Sultan's servants or guards, a newcomer had no idea what to do or where to turn. If he were offered a place – which usually did not happen – in most cases it had been wrested from some other person who had been occupying it, or not, with a great deal of ill-will and refusal.

Sometimes they would lock up the rooms and leave the palace, or lose the keys, so obtaining furniture and other necessities could be atrociously difficult. The storehouses were jammed with old and useless things, since any shipment of new furniture meant the automatic disposal, within very few days, of the old furniture, and the substitution of the new. These matters were guided by orders from the princes and princesses, servants and guards, so that the old always got mixed with the new, with no one clearly aware of who had taken or returned what, and with the possessions stacked in this way it was impossible for anyone to know what exactly was there and what was not.

Once these difficulties were surmounted and this problem dealt with, which usually took several days of complications, and feuds and the intervention of higher

authorities, there was the matter of relations between the residents and the visitors: any visitor, no matter how old or socially prominent, was considered fair game for dozens of hunters, opportunists and lurkers. With the exception of the Sultan's uncles and brothers, who often spent extended periods at the Rawdh Palace, with news of their arrival always coming before them, every newcomer was subjected to a number of inspections and virtual attacks: it began with the guards exchanging looks, then asking innumerable questions about various matters and people, in order that each side obtain ample information about the other: how close they were to the Sultan, and how socially prominent they were. This information was weighed against the number of horses or automobiles, guards and other entourage, their clothing and weapons and comportment. When this part was completed, and no further information was required, there were other inspections to ascertain other points, such as the preparedness of the guest. These inspections were carried out with extreme artifice and cunning, and dealt with the most precise facts about the new arrival: why had he come, how long would he stay, and dozens of other questions, all put spontaneously as if they were part of a general conversation held in total candor, but each side knew how to answer, and how to deceive, in order to mislead the other or give erroneous ideas, which led to each side reevaluating the other.

The information and assessments were immediately conveyed to the rear stations, which were by rank. It was usual to proceed indirectly, so that one of the seated men, who as a rule had not taken part in the questioning and inspection, might suggest that the newcomer leave at once; or a servant might show up, in a manner not lacking skill, to ask that someone might come, by way of those offered firsthand information so that an assessment of what had been said and done might be given, in order that it might be determined whether or not a higher authority in the chain of command need to be involved, to sort out the guests level of intimacy or importance: to see whether this kind of procedure need to be followed, or abandoned in favour of something else. All this

went on in an atmosphere of jokes, small services being offered, and the advice of bystanders.

The goal of the inspections, services and arguments was to establish the status of the newcomer: his rank among the many rival ranks within the palace. The newcomer would inevitably become part of one of the disputatious powers, in one of the camps, to be an appendage of one of the power blocs. To be sure, this did not happen that quickly or clearly, but in the new arrival's first hours and days most probabilities were settled, and left their long-lasting mark.

Although the chief aim was to establish the newcomer's status, or to win him over, there were many complex side effects, some of them comic. The errors, the lies, the swindles to which old and young alike resorted were the subject of discussion and were passed around from place to place, in different versions. Sometimes they even reached the Sultan, with all the exaggeration and provocation and incident, which generally led to real battles which began in the women's quarters and spread to the whole palace, even at times requiring the intervention of the Sultan or one of his representatives, to restore calm. Sometimes new administrators had to be brought in and residents and guests moved far away; sometimes new wings had to be built onto the palace – all this to quell the feuds, to put barriers or distance between the antagonists.

It was impossible for anyone in the Rawdh Palace to remain neutral or unaffected. The daily incidents and stories that circulated made everyone a participant. Even the visitors and functionaries and the men who delivered groceries became, in one way or another, part of the palace's problems and concerns.

While the men's contests and skirmishes took place in the open, in the shadows of the walls or below the palm trees, with shows of jocularly and the pretense of friendship, the women's battles raged behind closed doors, in secrecy, and took extremely cunning and injurious forms, for every woman who set foot in the palace turned it upside down and changed the rules, especially the rank of the people within. Everyone

recalled what had happened when Fadda, the Sultan's favourite wife, arrived. No sooner had she settled in the central building than everything in the palace changed, and the Sultan, who spent months of each year on the move from place to place, fighting and raiding, or else settling feuds among the tribes that supported him, now gave up his travels, or at least limited them as much as possible. He delegated his sons to make these trips on his behalf, with the help of their uncles or his own uncles. He did so that he might spend time with Fadda. No one said so out loud at first, but when the central building was enlarged and part of the servant quarters cleared out – more precisely, two of the Sultan's other wives were cleared out – the whispers became open criticism, and the murmurs became accusations circulated by the servants to the public. But the Sultan's presence in the palace, and the fact that the matter related directly to him, meant that nothing could come of the stories. His presence generated fear, as several times he had punished servants and the storage house workers, even having three of them executed for minor infractions as well as repeating slanders about him, or which he had spoken himself. Fear was not his only deterrent: he also made overtures in the form of gifts, small compensations and pay raises. These also on occasion were a form of excuse, which his angry wives accepted with a sort of equanimity, or so the huffy wife put it about via her servants or relatives, with ever-mounting boasts of the expensive gifts that came along with the Sultan's visit, though her exaggerations might meet with plain disbelief.

If it had nothing to do with the Sultan or one of his close wives, though the degree of closeness was generally not spelled out, whether in terms of seniority or blood or the number of sons she had given him, sometimes for reasons that no one was aware of, it remained a secret between the Sultan and that woman – otherwise, the war that broke out, especially among powerful women, might rage on uncontrolled, with no one knowing where it would lead. It began with whispers from one bedchamber to another, from one wing of the palace to another, then took the form of coldness in relations followed by a breaking off of relations, until it escalated to the exchange

of accusations, until at times one of them was dead.

There were many instances where servants in the Rawdh Palace were killed: such instances even recurred frequently, but usually happened – more precisely, always happened – in the Sultan's absence. When servants were killed it was usually because they were a direct instrument of the ongoing war, for it was they who delivered messages and spread rumours and accusations, and they who ran in this direction or that to provoke trouble. Some of them even pursued battles more zealously than the combatants, and in some cases they knew more about than they ought to have, which was considered reason enough to kill them.

It was customary for men to resort to arms, either in an outburst of anger or because of the embarrassing, minutely detailed stories originating in that "forbidden zone" which led them to do away with one of the message-bearers. The opposing side's slaves or guards would not be slow to strike back with similar murders by night, with the excuse that the crimes had been a mistake, or an accident while cleaning their guns.

That is how men were killed. Women were usually dispatched with poison or through childbirth. Several times, though not very often, women were found to have thrown themselves down the wells in the palace, or died of suffocation late at night in the North Bath, not far from the main building. And three of the Sultan's women "died of grief", in the words of Wafta, the Sultan's fourth wife. More than that were found hanged in their rooms – the servants swore that the rooms had been locked from the inside.

It was true that there were rather few murders, as compared to rumours, beatings, or expulsions from the palace; chases, gun fights, escapes and disappearances. The jokes, anecdotes and rumours that circulated, and the ridicule of the opposing side, were clearly a favourite pastime of the women, and not a few of the men as well. Odes that were composed to praise or deride a given person were on everyone's lips, and the servants learned them by heart and recited them with gusto, as if venting anger or taking revenge. Some private guards who

had spent much time in the palace affirmed that these odes reached the Sultan, who sometimes smiled and sometimes grew angry; and sometimes, they said, he repeated them, asked questions and asked for interpretations. As a rule nothing came out of his interest, especially when time passed, or the creator of the ode was not known, or the palace was relatively tranquil.

When there was no battle raging in the palace it was usually because one had just ended and another was being prepared. At times there were no battles at all, or they were muffled by the unexpected return of the Sultan or some other exceptional circumstance such as his marriage to a new wife from one of the powerful or hostile tribes. In such cases the Sultan craved special parties and the lavish giving of gifts, firing of guns, and especially festivals for his horses and the new horses he was receiving. This concern, whether directly from him or generated at his suggestion, was not merely an expression of joy but an assertion of power, tantamount to actual messages to the relevant parties at home and abroad.

New events inevitably convulsed that status quo, altering the constellation of alliances and feuds, with yesterday's foes becoming friends, and yesterday's battles becoming new friendships and alliances. The rumours and accusations, the stories and anecdotes were quickly forgotten – as if they had never been. The transition, of course, took place indirectly and rather quietly, but it was usually speedy, with apologies, banquets and the mandatory exile of many servants, advisors and guards on both sides, and those who'd had a hand in some of the insults and incidents. Their banishment was usually temporary, on the pretext of mistrust, or because there was some other need for their services. It frequently happened that some of those exiled died in mysterious circumstances. And a number of them, after what they judged to be a sufficient period, sent word via their friends or family to the party that had quarrelled with them to declare their readiness to disclose some of the scandalous things they knew about – things they had actually witnessed or taken part in – which information and implications could be put to great use.

Children and youths in the Rawdh Palace were quick to imitate the grown men and women. At first they did so at the goading of the servants, or because of the kind of talk and atmosphere that surrounded them; but before long they gave it up. Their alliances and feuds, among their leaders, instigators and abettors, expert at ridicule, cruelty and warfare, made no distinction between who their family liked and who their enemies were. The important thing was to be skillful, and to deploy this skill so that their families would notice.

There was not a child in the Rawdh Palace who did not have a pistol or rifle, and with so many guns around, and so much talk of battles and heroism, and because weapons were a father's first gift to his sons, it was very common to find guns in children's hands. The adults cautioned the little ones, gave them ammunition, and told the servants to keep their eyes open, but nothing was simpler than getting around all this.

Not only fixed objects but animals were targets for the children's bullets. They chased the dogs and cats and competed in killing them, or pretending to. The animals were often permanently crippled, and in that case, as soon as they could be caught, they were kept tied up to be moving targets. Some horses, too, were found dead, on one occasion one of the Sultan's horses, Ad'aj, or Blackeye. The stablemen had no choice but to make up excuses to offer the Sultan. They said the horse had fallen ill, that a scorpion had stung him, and finally that they had allowed him to graze in a certain field where he had eaten a poison plant, and when they went out searching, they found him at the edge of the pasture, swollen and dead.

Slaves and servants, too, provided target practice, especially when times were hard, though as a rule their killers were never made known. The action taken in such cases was not the apprehension and punishment of the killer, but vengeance wrought against the animals, slaves and servants or likely perpetrators, carefully and secretly, so that morning sometimes brought the discovery of a dead horse or a sudden outbreak of fire in one of the wings of the palace. There were several instances of slaves found murdered beside the palace,

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in the walled palm tree garden or near the stables. There was no respite, not even temporarily, until the palace officials turned tough, announcing loudly that they had told the Sultan everything; he would be arriving any day now. At this point the elders and wisest men intervened to put an end to the frivolities. "We know who's doing these things," they declared, "and when His Majesty comes, we are going to tell him every small detail and then let everyone watch out!"

With this, things calmed down. There were secret negotiations, marred by pressure and haggling, initiated by the women in the beginning, if the dispute were between the men, and when some possible sort of agreement had been reached, followed up by some of the older men until conciliation had been effected. The disputes were formally ended with visits and banquets, usually hosted by the friends and relations of the former antagonists.

In times of quiet and content, especially when the Sultan was in residence at the royal court, the palace was, with the exception of the main building and men's council, a hive of activity night and day, with the bustle of children, servants, women and eunuchs. Visits were exchanged, gifts were sent back and forth to show off what had been given, stories were told, servants were ordered around – all this and much more transformed the palace into a veritable beehive. With nightfall, impudent pranks began, along with the tense, fearful traffic of securing night time assignations – rarely with innocent intent.

What enlivened the palace more than everything else and dissipated the overpowering monotony, particularly in the quarters of abandoned wives, aunts from both sides of the family and lady visitors who numbered most days in the hundreds, were the innocent pranks and tricks that were played on most nights. The women had become experts at this. There were uncounted nights in which sleepers's faces were daubed with paint – they tried this with most visitors. Every night the younger children frightened the women with horrible screeching, or by switching off all the lights. Sometimes a maidservant would dress up as a man and suddenly barge in – the hostess often staged this trick to amuse her visitors.

Dozens of similar pranks involved food and drink, and the unending hilarity, laughter and shrieking could be heard in the men's quarters.

Somewhat crueler tricks were played on the servants and slaves with yet more surpassing skill. Men joined in, set contests and made bets, and the servants, or some of them took part, whether for fun or out of a very injudicious simplicity.