

# Muhsin's grandmother

at that time was suffering from a nervous complaint for which no medicine or cure could be found. Many doctors had treated her without achieving any results. At last one of them, after trying everything, said: "The best thing for a state like hers is peace of mind, freedom from worries and a cheerful outlook. Entertain her as much as possible. Pleasure and joy may improve her condition..."

"Entertain and delight her how, Doctor?"

"In other words, sing to her. Help her relax. Song and music are the best remedy for her."

From that time on the Maestra Labiba Shakhla visited Muhsin's family every summer in Damanhur, accompanied by her troupe and their instruments. She revived her soul with the sights and air of the countryside while entertaining the ailing old lady and filling the house with joy and pleasure. For little Muhsin, especially, those days had been the happiest of his life without question. He waited for them all year long, counting the months on his fingers in anticipation of them. It was a matter of great joy to him whenever a month passed.

Yes, he would not forget his happiness when he sat on the floor with the troupe around the maestra who was elevated on a large chair in the centre, holding the lute in her arms. He would raise his eyes and gaze at her as though observing a goddess on a marble pedestal. Then he would turn his small head right and left to his colleagues in the chorus with an inner relief which could not be described or characterised.

One afternoon al-Hajj Ahmad al-Mutayyib requested Maestra Shakhla to perform for the reception of a great wedding. The news spread through the troupe and had a marked effect. They all started to get ready. One rehearsed. Another tuned the

instruments. A third got the glittering costumes and jewellery in order, along with the cosmetic supplies: powders, perfumes, kohl for their eyelashes, and eyebrow pencils. In no time flat the members of the troupe were all bustling about, full of happiness and energy.

Only one person stood looking dejected and feeling heartbroken amid that movement and clamour. It was young Muhsin.

He stood sadly by the wall. He began to watch Maestra Shakhla while she was primping herself in front of the mirror. His eyes were pleading in entreaty. But she too at that time was unaware of him and totally preoccupied with her own affairs. Even she seemed to have forgotten he was an important member of that troupe. That thought pained him a great deal. He burst into tears. Then he started pounding the floor with his small feet, screaming, "Take me with you!" The artistes tried to calm him but that was impossible. His anger reached a peak. He had determined in his mind to accompany the troupe, no matter what it cost him: "What's wrong with me... Huh! I must go... I must go. I want to see the wedding. I've never seen a wedding."

Shakhla laughed at him a little; then she was moved by pity for him. She went to him and whispered tenderly to him promising to work on his mother so she would give permission for him to go.

The child hushed at once. He gave the maestra a look covering the full range from gratitude to hope. He knew his mother placed great trust in Maestra Shakhla. She had lived with the family so long that they had complete confidence in her. In fact Shakhla managed to persuade the mother, although she hesitated a little at first. She ended up giving her consent and permission based on the maestra's vow, "There's no need to fear for him so long as he is with me. I won't let him out of my sight. He can see a soiree for himself."

Muhsin was listening from the other side of the door, his heart quivering with fear and hope. As soon as he heard the permission, he let out a cry of joy and raced at once through the house to look for his new clothes while telling everyone – all the servants or artistes he encountered – that he was going with the troupe too.

In the depths of his young heart, he treasured a feeling for

Shakhla stronger than mere thanks and gratitude. It was a deep feeling he had never known before.

It was evening when the carriage transporting the artistes stopped before the home with the wedding. Outside, a large and magnificent tent pavilion had been erected. It was decorated with various types of hanging lamps and chandeliers, and with small rectangular and triangular banners of assorted colours: red, yellow, and green. Posts with gas lamps had been set up on both sides of the road leading to the house as though they were the row of rams on the way to the temple of Karnak.

The pavilion was filled with hundreds of chairs, seats and wooden benches which were occupied by a number – known only to God – of guests. Not even the hosts shared that knowledge with Him. Of course there were the guests who had actually been invited, but along with them was a vast number who had invited themselves and who had no idea whether the bride was named Zaynab or Shalabiya.

The waiters and servants in their formal, black jackets circulated, carrying vast trays of red-coloured drinks. Hands stretched out. That multitudinous crowd swarmed around, each seeking his share.

As soon as the artistes arrived there was an added commotion among the throngs. Two butlers hurried to meet the carriage and to assist the golden voiced maestra to alight.

Shakhla got out first, with great dignity. She dazzled the eyes with her ornaments, jewellery of gold pendants, clinking anklets, and silk gown, embroidered with gold and silver thread and bangles, which was visible beneath her black wrapper. All this shimmered in the dull light of the lamps.

She seemed to be in her entirety a piece of jewellery, growing and moving.

Maestra Shakhla took the ends of her shawl and wrapped it tightly around her. They were all escorted by servants and butlers to the door of the women's section. The looks and smiles of the male guests followed them. Words of flattery, courtship, and banter rose from the throngs: "Oh, my lord... My Lord!... Like that?... Like that! Make way, Fellows. You and the other one. One look, Granny!... Watch out for her wrapper, you... Ha ha..." and so on and so forth.

This hazing continued until the artistes disappeared from

sight behind the door of the women's section. As Maestra Shakhla entered she found herself in a spacious chamber filled with ladies who sparkled in their gowns and magnificent jewels like stars. Each of the artistes sat, on a cushion or mattress, surrounding the maestra who was elevated on a chair in the centre. They began to chatter among themselves using their special argot.

They began as usual to criticise everything their eyes saw. Blind Salm asked if the house, the wedding party, and the people were really as advertised: a household where both the people and the food were rich and the family and the bread refined... Her colleagues turned their keen and critical eyes round the room. They looked for a moment at the bridal stand which was in the centre. It was entirely covered in white silk. It contained chairs for the groom and the bride and was extremely elegant. Then they gazed at its baldachin. It was also lined with white silk and resembled a waxen sky. Hanging from it on every side were curtains of jasmine, white roses and other flowers. But the bride and groom had not arrived yet. For that reason the artistes turned their critical judgement to the guests... In any case, all signs indicated that it truly was a magnificent wedding.

Finally Najiya the lute player said, "Aye... in truth, the people are well off... only they ought to have the courtesy to offer us cigarettes so we can relax with a smoke..."

The maestra scolded her in a whisper, "Hush, Triller, the bride's mother is coming to us."

In fact, the bride's mother came up to the maestra and asked her graciously if she would favour them if only with a single song before the buffet was opened, since the guests were longing for that.

Shakhla answered politely, "Most gladly... your servant, Madam... But the troupe would like cigarettes... I would like a cup of coffee, without sugar, and the protection of God's name on him..." She pointed at Muhsin. She tried to complete her sentence, but the young fellow interrupted: "Me like the troupe!"

Shakhla replied in disapproval, "Cigarettes? Anything but that! No Muhsin, shame!" She turned quickly to the bride's mother and whispered in her ear, "For him, God's name, a glass of fruit punch."

The bride's mother answered, "Only that? Such a small

request, when we owe you so much?... You will have it, Sister... most willingly. Listen, Maestra Shakhla, by the Prophet, feel no reserve... The house is yours. This is your place. Whatever you want, ask for it... We want this night to be the night of a lifetime which we will remember you for, Madam Shakhla... Glow, shine, and let it ring out. Make it unsurpassable!" She went off quickly in order to fulfil the troupe's requests.

An hour passed while the artistes did nothing more than tune the instruments, smoke cigarettes, drink coffee, sip fruit punch, chatter and criticise.

Perhaps their most important accomplishment was to vex the audience and exhaust their patience. In actuality, this is a portion of the art of the people of that profession. Indeed, it is perhaps the sole art which the artistes of Egypt do to perfection: the art of vexation and keeping the audience waiting.

But no one became quite so impatient as little Muhsin. This apprentice in the art did not yet understand why the troupe was deliberately perpetrating that tedious delay and procrastination. He was stirred by a fever of enthusiasm. He wanted the troupe to sing at once. He asked the maestra innocently and forcefully, "Why are you silent? So when will we sing?..."

"The people have been waiting for us to sing for a long time."

Shakhla gave him a look of pity and compassion, like someone looking at an infant or an ignorant, inexperienced simpleton. Then she leaned over him and whispered confidentially, "This is our craft, Silly. This is the whole secret of the craft. The more you inconvenience the audience, the more that falls into your fingers... Do you understand, Son?"

Hafiza, the drummer, added, while she rubbed the head of the drum with her palm to tighten it, "Whoever said that it's an art to bore people was right."

Shakhla agreed, "That's the way it is."

Then she reached over with a cigarette in her mouth so Hafiza could light it for her.

When Shakhla determined that according to the dictates of the art, the moment had arrived to sing and she gave the order to pick up the instruments, it was too late. The wedding hosts came to announce the opening of the buffet. So the maestra ordered the instruments set down. Smiling, she said to the troupe, "A blessing, Group... Thanks to you as much as me."

Towards midnight the wedding festivities were at a height of joy and commotion. The troupe had sung several numbers and popular songs, each separated from the next by long rest periods.

The audience of enthusiastic guests, surrounded the troupe like the crescent moon around the star on the Egyptian flag. They listened as though they were all a single individual... not in the sense of being quiet and silent, with their heads bowed. To the contrary... their cries of admiration, approval and enthusiasm were louder than the singing. Yet their faces all had the same expression: one of boisterous happiness. They had a single expression because the music had that effect on them. There was not even one of the guests who had set herself apart to wrest some other meaning from the music, or some different emotion from that filling the others. They all became a single person as they responded to the music. The music itself seemed divinely capable of turning all creation back into a single being.

Just a little after midnight someone came to whisper softly in Maestra Shakhla's ear. She at once passed it on to the members of the troupe, under her breath. The news prompted them to straighten up. Their faces took on an air of seriousness and significance. They raised their instruments energetically and enthusiastically, like soldiers raising their weapons on receiving the order to attack. Suddenly a shrill and prolonged ululation like the whistle of a houseboat on the Nile was heard throughout the house. The bride appeared, fresh from the hand of the dresser, in her white silk gown, with the bridal tiara on her head. Her family and relatives and the women of the household followed her, with the dresser on her left, scattering salt in every direction, and crying out, "If you love the Prophet, pray for him."

The bride advanced till she reached her chair in the stand where she sat down. The dresser sat near her and spread her hands out with her kerchief to receive the wedding presents from the guests. Meanwhile the troupe was singing with such a clamour that it filled the room.

As soon as the bride settled down a person came to announce the arrival of the groom. He appeared at the door. He entered with embarrassment, after smiling to the women's section. They had come to send him off and were also seeking a glimpse of the bride. And that did not keep them from looking at the beautiful women among the guests and smiling at them. The groom made

his way between the ladies who were almost devouring him with their eyes while they whispered their opinion of him to each other. So it went until he reached the stand. He paused there hesitantly. Then he collected his courage and raised in his right hand the white silk veil attached to the tiara to reveal the bride's face. At this necks craned and the people present stood up. They were staring in a dreadful silence, hardly breathing as though they were awaiting a verdict not subject to reversal or ratification. Even the troupe, although they were singing and playing enthusiastically and vigorously, kept their eyes fixed with intense concern on the face of the groom. When he lifted the veil the groom seemed slightly surprised and astonished. But he quickly recovered himself and smiled. He bent over the bride's hand and raised it to his lips to kiss. Then he climbed onto the stand and sat down beside her.

At that, the sounds of joy and jubilation rose from every side. Ear-deafening ululation burst out. The singing of the artistes grew louder while the commotion and uproar increased.

Suddenly the sound of castanets was heard ringing through the place. Shakhla, half bare in a glittering gold dance costume, made her appearance. She advanced to the middle of the chamber, dancing with all of her supple and slender body. Her torso was at play as though it was a thong made of taffy. The castanets resounded from her fingers which were decorated with henna.

The room went silent. The commotion of the guests died away. Everyone was staring with enchanted admiring eyes which followed the motions of that extraordinary body and the pulsations of that slim belly and of her breasts like ripe fruit. All these were aquiver in a beautiful vision to the accompaniment of the drum and the tambourine.

Among all those dazzled eyes, Muhsin's were the most dazzled and amazed, in an extraordinarily innocent way. It was not the first time he had seen her dance. Indeed he had seen her dance time and again. Tonight, however, when she was the target of all those eyes which were devouring her with admiration, Muhsin felt for the first time a kind of glory and pride, because he knew her and lived with her. He was in the troupe... in her troupe.

By two a.m., after much singing and dancing, the bridal pair

made known their desire to leave the room for the nuptial chamber.

They rose and came down the steps of the stand slowly, arm in arm. They were trailed by the family, relatives, and hangers-on. Maestra Shakhla got up with all her troupe, their instruments in their arms. They were followed by the guests. Thus the wedding procession, amid cries of praise to God and ululation, went forward till the couple reached the door of their room. They entered and the door closed. There arose in the house a final trill of Joy. Then the party started to break up and the commotion, hubbub and turmoil to dissolve.

Shakhla was intoxicated with her success. She began to separate herself graciously from the guests and make her way through the crush, while she hummed with pleasure, till she got back to the troupe. She wanted to get ready to depart. Then she suddenly remembered Muhsin. She struck her breast in anxiety and fear: "Woe is me!... What a fix! Where's Muhsin?"

The fact was they had all forgotten poor, little Muhsin. They were distracted from him by the wedding procession for the bride and groom. None of them paid attention to the fact that it was after two a.m. and that the child could not keep fighting off sleep forever.

Shakhla searched with anxious, worried eyes until she finally found him stretched on the floor and half hidden under the chair. He was fast asleep. She took him at once in her arms quickly and vigorously. She covered his face with her kisses... He opened his eyes.

When he could see her clearly, his sleep left him all of a sudden. His lashes trembled and his cheeks flushed. He was a little uneasy. He didn't know why... Then he quickly released himself from her embrace and ran off.

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*Tawfiq al-Hakim, born in Alexandria in 1898, was one of Egypt's outstanding novelists and playwrights. This text is an edited extract from Return of the Spirit, published by Three Continents Press, Washington D.C., in 1990. The original Arabic edition, which appeared in 1927, is said to have marked the birth of the Egyptian novel. William M. Hutchins is a professor of Arabic and well-known for his translations of modern Egyptian literature.*