From the Story of the Martyrs

Al-Risala, 23 April 1934

That night they spoke nothing of their sweet past or their bitter present, nor did they take comfort in talk of those far-off homelands where they had once known the delights of life and enjoyed its ease, walking as free men who owned no master's authority but Caesar's and his governors' — though others, too, might claim over them no small measure of power and force, and might be offered by them no small measure of obedience and submission.

Nor did they pass that night, as was their custom, in those evening tales they used to tell once their labors were done and they had turned to their rest, meeting one another as the day waned and night came on — tales by which they used to relive that bright and beautiful life of theirs, and summon back the scenes of their pleasures and their ease; there, where the heat never grew so fierce as to scorch the skin and melt the flesh, where the eye never fell upon bare mountains and desolate wastes, where the land was never too narrow for its people nor its people too many for the land, where men greeted their days content and smiling, and welcomed their nights at play and at ease.

No — nor did they pass that night, as they used to, speaking of the enchanting, enchanted women who could turn their lives to dreams and their labor to sport, who would banish every sorrow from them and lavish upon them every bliss; who ensnared them with word and glance, tormented them with disdain and distraction, and made them happy with nearness and union. No — nor did they pass that night in talk of Caesar and his court, nor in news of the governor and his retinue, nor in tales of the war between Persia and Rome; and what were they now to Caesar and Constantinople? What were they now to those smiling, mighty frontiers that smiled upon their own people as though they were paradise, and scowled upon their enemies as though they were hell? What were they now to Persia and Rome? And what had Mecca to do with the battlefields of Persia and Rome?

No — nor did they pass that night, as they sometimes did, in talk of their masters and patrons, of the rivalries and struggles that ran among them, the schemes and stratagems plotted between them, the wealth and riches they amassed, the misfortunes and calamities that befell them. No — nor did they pass that night, as they sometimes did, in talk of those

caravans that set out from Mecca to Syria, with which their souls would travel in spirit along those hateful roads whose length and hardship they well remembered, having once crossed them as captive wretches driven to Mecca as slaves in bondage — those same roads by which a caravan would return to Mecca from Syria, bearing from Caesar's land a jumble of news and garbled, troubled tales, which they would seize upon and set about composing and arranging, analyzing and ordering, until they had made of it something coherent, or something near coherent, and took from it whatever knowledge they could of the affairs of those homelands to which they now had no path at all.

No — that night they spoke of none of this; for the talk of Mecca had occupied them, to the exclusion of all else — and how could it not, when their own companion Nastas had had a part in it, and had stirred up much of it himself? And there he sat among them now, gloomy, downcast, visibly grieving, his soul in the utmost turmoil, speaking to them in a broken, darkened voice, as though sorrow, remorse, and despair had wrapped him in some dense, gathering darkness that would yield up nothing to the light.

And why should he not be despondent, not be wretched, why should he not grieve and repent, why should he not be seized with dread and anguish, when his Christian hand had spilled innocent blood before the day had even reached its noon? For these men were a company of Roman Christians who had been driven to some far edge of the desert, and certain caravans had come upon them and made of them merchandise, and the fortunes of bondage had turned them about until they came at last into the possession of certain lords of Quraysh. And Nastas was the purest of conscience among them, the clearest of heart, the greatest in his portion of faith; and for all this he was the most patient of them beneath whatever distress befell him, the most steadfast in bearing whatever trial was laid upon him, content with this calamity, which he looked upon as a test of himself, a trial of his faith, a proving of his trust, a preparation of his soul to live the life of the blessed once its sojourn in this wretched, hateful world had run its course.

But that night he showed his companions something quite unlike the fortitude and patience, the pride and endurance they were used to seeing in him; and they gently chided him, and tried to comfort him, and rebuked him, and pressed their rebuke upon him, and came at his soul from every side, wishing to turn it from this deep sorrow, to lift from it some of its heavy burden — but they could not reach him at all, and only

drove him further into grief and further into despair. And perhaps their talk did reach the depths of his soul and stir it, and drove him at last to speak, so that he began to talk in words broken by sobs and wet with tears.

Now Nastas was a slave belonging to Safwan ibn Umayya, and that very day his master had carried out his order against a captive of the Ansar named Zayd ibn al-Dathinna: he had handed him over to Safwan, who commanded him to take the man out of the sanctuary, and, once he had brought him to al-Tan'im, to kill him and return. Such a deed was not one Nastas relished — yet it would not have driven him to a despair so deadly had he not learned what he had learned of his captive's fate and death, and of the fate of his companions; had he not seen what he had seen concerning Zayd, and heard what he had heard concerning Khubayb, and had the tales not reached him of those others whom death had overtaken before the treachery of the perfidious men of Hudhayl could carry them to Mecca to be sold to Quraysh.

But he had learned what he had learned, and seen what he had seen, and heard what he had heard; and so there came back to him things he had read in books, and events that used to terrify him when he heard their tales told by the preachers. He recalled those martyrs who had been slaughtered for the sake of Christianity, who had been tried with whatever trials and stratagems God had decreed for them, yet whose souls had not weakened, whose resolve had not faltered, who had not failed their faith, into whose hearts doubt had never found a way. He recalled those martyrs who had built the glory of Christianity upon their own broken bodies, nourished it with their blood, strengthened it through their own weakness, exalted it through the humiliations they bore for its sake, and upheld it through the injuries and torments they suffered in its cause. He recalled those martyrs whom he held great and revered, whom he believed to be his intercessors, and the intercessors of men like him, before God; his righteous model, his fair example, his highest ideal — and he thought himself the happiest of men could he but win some portion of what they had won: the torment of this world and the bliss of the next, the abasement of this world and the glory of the next, and that easy, swift death followed by an everlasting, blessed, unbroken life whose bliss knows no bound.

He recalled these martyrs, and recalled that in obeying his master Safwan's command he had done no more than kill a single one of them, and had thereby committed that very sin committed by the tyrants of old

who persecuted the martyrs and tormented them, then offered them up as sacrifices to their gods and idols. There his soul was seized with turmoil, and his heart shaken as though by an earthquake; he saw his whole life transfigured into some abhorrent evil, saw whatever good he had done turned to corruption, saw whatever suffering he had borne become as dust and nothing. There remorse took full possession of him, and despair filled his heart, and his companions found themselves powerless to touch his soul with whatever comfort or consolation they offered him.

Yet he felt in himself nothing of resentment toward his master Safwan, nor did he harbor against him any hatred; rather, all his resentment, all his rancor, was divided between himself and a woman of Quraysh — Sulafa, daughter of Sa'id ibn Sahm, wife of Talha ibn Abd Allah ibn Abd al-Uzza. He held himself in the utmost resentment, and hated her with the utmost hatred, because she had sinned in bringing about the killing of this martyred man; and he was furious with Sulafa, full of rancor against her, because she was the root of this evil, the source of this sin, the origin of this calamity. And he would say to his companions:

“Had this sinful woman not vowed what she vowed, and proclaimed what she proclaimed among the people of the desert, Safwan would never have been driven to what he was driven to, nor would Safwan have obtained what he obtained, nor would he have bought his captive, nor would I have carried out his order against him.”

Said his companions:

“And what did Sulafa vow, and what did she proclaim among the Bedouin?”

He said:

“Do you remember the day Quraysh massed to make war upon their adversary at Yathrib, and how the nobles of Mecca, nursing their grievances, were consumed with rage, their hearts filled with bitter resentment, the specters of disgrace trembling before them — remembering their defeat when they had first met their adversary, and the ruin he had wrought upon them, and how he had left their nobles dead upon the field, men who never returned home, nor ever again enjoyed that profitable trade caravan which Abu Sufyan had managed to save? And they dreaded that death might again show itself before them,

that they might not stand firm against it nor bear to look upon it, and might flee, routed, as they had fled before, and leave their nobles dead as they had left them before. So they resolved together to fortify themselves with their women, and through them to ward off defeat and disgrace; and they chose from among them those of the highest rank, the loftiest standing, the widest renown, the most capable of driving their men into the depths of death. And Sulafa was among these women; she went out with her husband and her three sons, and returned with the victors the very picture of a bereaved mother, having lost her husband and lost her sons."

Then Nastas fell silent, as though summoning up some horror that shakes the soul and wrenches the heart; then he returned to his tale in a voice grown calm and distant, and said:

"It was indeed a dreadful battle, that one fought at Yathrib. Quraysh came back speaking of wonders — came back speaking of brothers driving one another to death, came back speaking of mothers who urged their sons on until a man slew his own brother. They came back speaking of Umm Mus'ab, of how she could show no grief nor sorrow, since her son had been an enemy of Quraysh and a companion of Muhammad. Quraysh came back victorious, speaking of this Sulafa, who had lost her husband, and received her two sons, one after the other, each arriving with an arrow already lodged in him, so that she laid his head upon her lap and asked him: My son, who struck you? And he answered: I do not know — but I heard a voice cry out: Take this, and I am the son of al-Aflah! and then the arrow struck me. So he spoke, and then gave up his soul between her arms. There Sulafa vowed that, should she ever gain power over her sons' killer, she would drink wine from the very skull of his head; and there she proclaimed among the people of the desert, and the Bedouin of the Hijaz, that whoever brought her the head of this son of al-Aflah should have a hundred camels. This is the root of the evil, and this is the source of the calamity."

Said one of them:

"And what would the Bedouin not do for the sake of a single slaughtered camel — let alone ten camels, let alone a hundred?"

Said Nastas:

"And treachery is the easiest thing the Bedouin will do to gain far less than that sum. A party of Hudhayl came to the Prophet of Yathrib,

claiming that they had believed in him and submitted to him, that his religion had spread among them, and asking him to send with them someone to instruct them in religion and teach them its laws — showing sincerity while concealing treachery, seeking nothing but to lay hold of a few men of Yathrib whom they might sell to Quraysh, that Quraysh might have its vengeance upon them and they their profit from them. And God, for a purpose He had decreed, willed that the Prophet of Yathrib should choose six of his companions, and set over them Asim ibn Thabit ibn al-Aflah — the very man Sulafa sought — and that he should send these companions of his along with those treacherous men. They had scarcely drawn near to Mecca when the hidden thing was revealed, the evil declared, the treachery made plain. Those who had proclaimed their faith now cried out for help, and help came to them — from Hudhayl itself; and the companions of Muhammad, seeing the treachery, withdrew to the mountain, and their enemies swore to them that they would not kill them nor do them harm, if only they would surrender themselves. But Asim and two of his companions swore they would never submit to the covenant of an unbeliever, and fought until they were slain; while the others, loving life and yielding to it, allowed themselves to be taken captive — and scarcely had they done so when they too saw the treachery, and one of them refused to follow the treacherous men, and was killed on the spot; and the remaining two were kept as captives, carried to Mecca, and sold there. One of them Safwan bought, and gave me charge of him — that I might fulfil for him whatever bliss was decreed for him, and fulfil for myself whatever wretchedness was decreed for me."

Then Nastas broke into sobbing, and was overcome by it a while; then he returned to his tale, in that same calm and distant voice, and said:

"I have come to know and to see, of the tales of these people, what I never thought I could know or see. And had this wretchedness not been fated and decreed for me, what I learned before I committed this sin might well have turned me from committing it. And what had I to fear, had I disobeyed Safwan and not spilled this forbidden blood? Which of the two was the lesser evil for me? Which was I bound to prefer — death at Safwan's hand, or the eternal wretchedness to which I have now been driven? Hudhayl rejoiced at the killing of Asim ibn Thabit, and said: a hundred camels the Qurayshi woman will give us, when we bring her this head! — and they came forward meaning to sever his head; but what did I hear, and what do you hear now? A cloud of wasps rose up to shield him,

protecting him, keeping them from reaching him; and they said to one another: Leave him be until night falls, and then we shall drive off these wasps, and his head will be ours for the taking. But when night came and they set out meaning to sever his head — what did I hear, and what do you hear now? They never reached him, never touched him; instead a flood came and swept him away, and carried him off to where no hand could reach. And I have been told that this man had vowed never to touch an unbeliever, nor to be touched by one; and I have been told that when he stood against them and fought them and they fought him, he raised his voice, imploring his Lord, and said: O God, I have defended Your faith at the day's first hour — so defend my flesh at its last."

And when Nastas wept at this telling, he did not weep alone; his companions all wept with him, and wept long, until his tears were stilled and their weeping had quieted, and he fell back into silence. But they pressed him to finish what he had begun to tell, and he said:

"And what more would you have me tell you? I used once to read the accounts of our martyrs and hear their tales, and I would tremble at them, and hold them in awe, and fear them, and long for them, and wish that I had lived in those days when life was cheap and faith was dear; I wished that I had been one of those men who sold their souls to God. And now it has been granted me, in this age, to live among martyrs, to see them, to speak with them, and to hear them — yet I have not sold my soul to God, but sold it to Satan; I have not shed my own blood for God's sake, but shed the blood of a noble martyr. I heard Abu Sufyan, the chief of Quraysh, ask him: which would you rather — that Muhammad stand now in your place, and you be safe among your own people? And he answered: By God, I would not wish that Muhammad suffer even the prick of a thorn, while I sat safe among my people. And Abu Sufyan said to the nobles of Quraysh gathered there: I have never seen any man love another as these people love their master. And then my sinful hand reaches out toward this pure life, and quenches its lamp; toward this innocent blood, and spills it upon the ground, for fear of Safwan's wrath — how horrible! I had thought that Safwan possessed nothing of me but my body, and that my soul remained free; but now I know that I am truly a slave, and I know now that the authority of masters over slaves may reach beyond the body to the soul itself, and I know now that the man who accepts bondage, and will not die rather than lose his freedom, has in truth slain himself. I slew myself the day I chose life, and consented to be a piece of merchandise in the hands of those traders."

Said a man among his companions:

“If this man you struck down was indeed a noble martyr — and I see him as nothing less — then his companion, whom the Banu al-Harith ibn Amir put to death, was no less noble than he; and perhaps his death was even more terrible to the soul, more rending to the heart, than his companion's. No hand of some lowly freedman or slave was raised against him in malice — rather, they themselves thirsted for his blood, eager to quench his fire with their own hands. Their whole company brought him out to al-Tan'im, and when they meant to kill him, he asked their leave to draw near his Lord in prayer before he took his last steps in this life; they granted it, and he prayed two prostrations, then said to them: Had I not feared you might think I feared death, I would have prayed longer still. Then one of them rose against him and killed him, and they went their way, speaking among themselves of his character and his virtues in terms that might well have turned them from killing him, had their hearts not been hardened to the very likeness of stone, or harder still. They used to say that they had kept him imprisoned in the house of a woman among them, and that this woman would tell them the most wondrous things of him — she used to see him, though bound in chains, eating of fruits that no one in Mecca could obtain at that season, and she never knew how they came to him. And she told them that when the day dawned on which he was to be killed, he asked her for a razor, that he might make himself ready for death; she sent it to him by a small child, still crawling, and no sooner had she done so than she was seized with alarm, and her heart filled with terror, and she said to herself: what is to stop this captive from killing this child, and thereby taking his own vengeance before death overtakes him? She hurried to him in fear, and found him seated with the child upon his knee, playing and fondling him — and she thought, most likely, that he was thinking of some child of his own, far away. And when he saw the woman approaching, seized with terror, he smiled at her a sorrowful smile, and looked upon the child with a look of love, and said to the woman: Did you fear treachery for this child? Treachery is no part of our nature. Was such a man as this one that Quraysh was right to bring forth and put to death, if only Quraysh knew the truth, or valued the good, or held any awe of God, or felt in their hearts any trace of mercy or piety?”

Said one of them:

“I can only think that these people of Yathrib have some great matter in hand; for had they built their cause upon some falsehood of this

worldly life, they would never have met it with such resolve, nor borne such terrors for its sake, nor held their own souls, their blood, their wealth, and their families so cheap, to this degree. By God, I hear what is said and see what happens, and I have no doubt that the people of this land are entering upon an age like that age our own people entered when the messengers of Christ arose among them. This faith, adorned in certain hearts until it made them scorn all else; this certainty, which has taken hold of certain souls until it made all things easy to them; these wonders brought to men so simply, so plainly, unlooked-for and unhoped-for, and yet never deluding them, never leading them to arrogance, never driving them to insolence or excess — all this is clear proof that heaven has not, in these days, drawn near to earth as it draws near now, that the tidings of heaven have not, in these days, touched earth as they touch it now, and that God intends for mankind something we never thought could be, but which now, it seems, has come to pass, or is about to. As for me, I mean to join these people, if I can find any way to do so."

Said the others:

"How easy that is to say, and how hard to do! And how could men like us ever escape the lords of Quraysh? Even the free men of the desert around Mecca are watched, whoever sets out for Yathrib or turns toward it — how much more, then, the slave?"

Said Nastas, weeping:

"Think on it, and make your plans; prepare yourselves, and make ready; for you are fit for this honor, if God has decreed it for you. As for me, wretchedness has been written upon me, and I do not think that all the seas of the earth, were they let loose upon al-Tan'im, could ever wash from me the trace of this innocent blood which this sinful hand of mine has spilled."

Then he rose and left them, running, quickening his pace as he ran; and they never saw a trace of him again, nor ever again heard word of him.