The Devil's Doing

Musamarat al-Jayb, 24 March 1946.

This was the devil's doing, there is no doubt of it; for it runs counter to the nature of things, for Heaven is too exalted to concern itself with such trifles. Love makes its way to hearts through the eyes, and through the ears; through the image the eye beholds and carries to the soul, bearing with it the seeds of attraction or aversion, or through the voice the ear carries to the heart, bearing with it the seeds of tenderness or cruelty.

But that love should reach hearts, and hatred reach souls, by way of hands that strike and faces that receive the blow — this is something unheard of, which the nature of things never devised, and which the will of Heaven never sent down, but which the mischief of some cunning devil invented instead, or the trickery of one of those imps that play with people's hearts and souls, and govern their passions and desires however they please, as often as not.

And this love I am telling you of, and this hatred that followed in its wake, were both born of one of those sharp, languid glances of which the ancient poet speaks:

Those eyes with the languor at their corners slew us, and did not revive those they slew.
They felled the man of sense until he could not stir, though they are the feeblest of God's creatures, as human beings.

Nor were they born of any of those voices of which the ancient poet also speaks:

O my people, my ear is enamored of part of the tribe, for the ear falls in love before the heart does, at times.

Rather, it was two slaps that gave them birth; the one opened for the two lovers a door to a bliss beyond description, and the other opened for them a door to a hell beyond endurance. And had the story of these two lovers been one of those tales invented by the imagination of writers, I would not have related it to you at all, but would have turned away from it entirely, and seen in it nothing but the product of a diseased imagination, one skilled not at soaring in the realms of art but at

descending into crude fact.

But it is a story that no imagination invented; the circumstances of life invented it instead, and if it depicts anything at all, it depicts the absurdity of man, the mischief of the devil, and the way human life is sometimes composed of things of very little worth indeed.

This happened in a city of France that you all know perfectly well, and in one of that city's gardens that not one of you has failed to visit, morning or evening, whether seeking exercise or making your way to the university; for you have all studied at Montpellier, and you have all visited its famous garden called … and I believe you remember that a great many public festivities are held in that garden.

Just before one of these festivities, this story began — a story that will make some laugh, who wish to laugh, and will sadden others, who wish to be saddened, and that depicts, in any case, the absurdity of life. People were crowding most thickly at the garden gate to attend a military band concert, the proceeds of which had been set aside to aid the city's own sons wounded in the First World War. This was at two o'clock in the afternoon, when people had just finished their lunch, and it was at the end of spring and the beginning of summer, when that damp heat that melts bodies and souls alike grows fierce at Montpellier, driving people out of their usual composure and readying them for sudden anger.

People were crowding and jostling shoulder to shoulder, and our friend was pushing with the pushers and shoving with the shovers, advancing a step and falling back another, when his face suddenly received, on one of its two cheeks, a slap from which he never quite recovered — a slap that turned his attention to himself, and turned other people's attention to him, and turned his attention to the source from which it might have come, and filled his heart with anger, resentment, and indignation — indeed, let us say it filled his heart with pride, chivalry, and a surge of outrage at his squandered dignity and his insulted honor.

For our friend was an Arab, a man of the countryside, and no sooner had the slap reached his face than his soul rose up, his passions were stirred, the blood boiled in his veins and rushed to his struck cheek, and he became certain that the whole of Arabness had been insulted in his own person, an insult no slap like the one he had received could undo, and nothing could wash away but that very blood which al-Mutanabbi claimed was alone capable of delivering lofty honor from harm when it is spilled at its sides.

All this took place in an instant — indeed, in less than an instant, if there can be anything shorter than an instant — and our friend raised his head, and readied himself for a crushing, annihilating assault that would spare nothing and leave nothing standing; but no sooner had he raised his head and turned it to the right than he bowed it again, his tongue saying, against his own will, in a trembling voice that made those around him laugh, and that made him laugh at himself afterward: "Forgive me, Madame!" The lady who had struck him said: "Forgive you for what? No, it is I who must apologize to you; I thought you had wronged me with that rude shove, and no sooner had my hand struck your face than I knew you were innocent, and that the guilty party was someone else, a man with no share of either manners or breeding."

And this other man, who had no share of either manners or breeding, had melted away and vanished during all this. And who knows — perhaps he was nothing but a devil whose trick had succeeded, then swallowed by the earth or snatched up by the sky; or perhaps he was nothing but a figment that had played tricks with the lady's head. What is certain is that she felt, or thought she felt, an ungentlemanly shove, and so struck this young man's face, only to discover his innocence moments later, and so apologized to him for her slap at the very same moment that he was apologizing to her for the violence he had been about to unleash upon her, and for the anger he had been about to pour out upon her entirely.

And what is equally certain is that this slap, which prompted an exchange of apologies, went on to prompt an exchange of smiles, and then an exchange of conversation, and then the shared enjoyment of the military music whose proceeds had been set aside for the city's own sons wounded in the First World War. And what is equally certain is that the threads this slap had spun did not snap when the concert ended, but continued on, becoming the strange origin of a strange love.

I do not imagine you are waiting for me to tell you how the slapper and the slapped left the garden, and how they made their way together to a French café, there near the esplanade, and how they cooled themselves there, from the heat of summer and the heat of the concert, with two glasses of beer, and how their conversation flowed between them, sweet and serene to the soul at times, sharp and heart-rending at others, until the coming of night parted them — but with an appointment to meet again …

And you all know where such appointments lead, once they begin. Our two friends' appointments led, in the end, to a love so fevered and ablaze that nothing could soothe its anguish but marriage; so picture for yourselves — if you need to picture it at all — the two lovers' infatuation during this engagement, which lasted no short time, and picture for yourselves its effect on the young man's life, on his pursuit of learning and his devotion to his studies, and its effect on the young man's Egyptian family in a village of the countryside, and its effect too on the young woman's own soul, and on her conservative family …

Picture all this for yourselves, and reckon that the love this slap had kindled overcame it all, triumphing over every difficulty and every obstacle in its path, and ended in marriage despite the studies neglected, despite the resistance that came from the Egyptian countryside, and the other resistance that came from the French countryside; and picture for yourselves too that this slap kindled heartbreak in many a heart, and kindled resentment in many a heart as well: heartbreak in the hearts of young women who had been thinking of this young man, and resentment in the hearts of young men who had been thinking of this young woman …

But love is a sweeping flood that leaves nothing in its path uncarried away, a raging wind that leaves nothing it touches but reduced to dust, and love is by its nature a conqueror: a conqueror of people, a conqueror of things, and a conqueror of events and troubles too. And the love of these two lovers conquered everything, conquered everyone, and one morning the two lovers stood before the mayor in the city of Montpellier, who put two questions to them, and heard two answers from them, and read to them a passage from the civil code, and then declared that they had become man and wife … and that slap arrived at its original destination.

And so a door was opened for the two lovers onto a bliss no eye had ever seen the like of, no ear had ever heard the like of, and no one's imagination had ever conceived the like of; and it was as though that slap had been something like a knock upon a door, asking leave to enter, and as though love itself had fashioned the young woman's hand and used it to knock upon the young man's heart — and the door of that heart was neither the young man's eye, nor his ear, nor his mouth, but the surface of his face, which was neither striking nor handsome.

And the two lovers enjoyed this bliss for as long as God willed them to enjoy it; they tasted its delights in France, and traveled with it between Italy and Switzerland, and crossed the sea with it at last to Egypt, and settled with it, as you know, in one of the Egyptian cities, happy and content, knowing of life nothing but its smiling, radiant face. But the face of life is not always smiling; it may sometimes be overcast with a frown, nor is it always bright; it may sometimes be veiled in darkness.

And the frowning and darkening of life may proceed from people themselves, when they do some things and leave others undone, when they speak, and what they say becomes a source of evil, and when they fall silent, and their silence becomes a path to suspicion … when they act, and their action provokes resentment, and when they grow idle, and their idleness becomes a means to accusation.

And the truth is that the life of this married couple darkened one day, not because either of them said anything or did anything, but because one of those hours of sweet, innocent serenity refused to pass without leaving behind it bitterness, rancor, and doubt.

For the couple found themselves free one day for one of those pleasant gatherings in which friends while away the evening after lunch or after dinner, once they have finished a meal well prepared and a drink well chosen, and once they turn to conversation at times, and to music at other times, and to dancing in between; and the friends that night took their share of life's pleasures and then went their separate ways, and the couple were left alone, and fell to talking about their dinner party, and about the conversation that had surrounded it, and about the evening's entertainment that had followed it.

And the husband was full of enthusiasm as he reviewed it all, while his wife listened to him without any liveliness at all, or perhaps she listened to him with only one of her two ears and not both of them together; perhaps she was somewhat distracted from him. He gently drew her attention once, and she did not notice; he drew her attention a second time, and the effort availed him nothing at all, so he went on with his enthusiastic account, and she went on with her distracted listening, until something about her manner began to trouble him.

And the slightest suspicion between lovers is never free of danger, for their hearts are sensitive, and their souls are like nothing so much as dry kindling, which no sooner is touched by fire than it becomes a raging blaze that fills everything around it with flame; and it was as though the

young man's soul had been prepared for something of this sort all along, for he was a jealous man who could not bear doubt nor endure suspicion … so why this distraction of his wife from his words, and her persistence in this distraction?! His soul grew troubled, and its trouble grew more intense, and then it rose up, and he lost his composure entirely, and before he knew it he was saying more than he had meant to say, and she was imagining more than she ought to have imagined, and reckless words met and collided with one another, and the young man's hand reached out and then drew back — and the very slap he had once received in Montpellier, the slap that had opened a door to bliss for the two lovers, was now returned to its original owner, in one of the cities of Egypt, opening instead a door to hell for the two wretched souls.

And I have no wish to describe their affair to you any further than that, for I have no wish to go beyond allusion into plain statement, nor beyond hint into open declaration; and I, for all you know of how deeply I carry a grudge once I have conceived one, would hate to wish upon even my bitterest enemy that he should come to what this young man came to, or what this young woman came to. Do you not see that all this evil can only be the devil's doing?

And the company set about making this story a subject for debate, offering explanations and interpretations, denying this point and conceding that one, until one of them raised his voice until it forced the others into silence, and said, with biting irony: "How often slaps open doors to bliss, and then open, after that, doors to hell! Have you not heard that one slap once leapt a certain man up to an exalted position, and that another slap might just as well cast him down, in an instant, to the lowest depths?!"

The teller of the tale said: "Now that you have begun to delve into the affairs of particular persons, and to hint at political events, I have no further place among you." And he took his leave, while his companions called him back, saying: "Come back; we have come to believe that your story is indeed the devil's doing."