

My Brother Rashid



The boy meeting David off the bus outside the Bab el Guisa gate when he reached Fez in the late afternoon looked more French than Moroccan. His face was pale and tousled fair hair fell over green eyes. He failed to smile and responded to David's greeting with a very Gallic shrug that suggested there were far better things he could be doing with his time than waiting for someone off the bus.

He seemed equally indifferent to his appearance. The sleeves of his grey jacket were too long and the right side pocket was torn half-off, the trousers were ragged at the bottoms and the heels flapped off his shoes. He spoke French fluently but with condescension as though he was talking to a subject race.

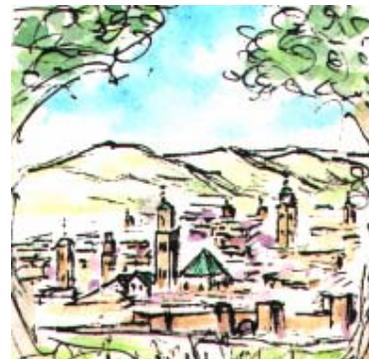
'Viens,' he said, impatiently gesturing David to follow and straightway broke into Arabic to order a mule driver to carry his bags. Having delivered these instructions with a crisp authority he set off through the gates into the depths of the city.

Fez lay within an amphitheatre of mountains and hidden inside its high walls it seemed to go downhill forever. The steep alleys were too narrow even for handcarts and the crowds jostled with mules struggling for a grip on the cobbles, weighed down with heaps of dripping hides, bales of wool, beams of timber. The muleteers cried 'Baleuk give way!', and people pressed against walls and into doorways to let them pass.

They passed a flour mill where veiled women queued with empty sacks, and then a 'hamman' steam baths, where the furnace cellars were being stoked with fresh firewood. Rashid hastened on down into the dark well of the city following alleys that burrowed under the houses as often as they weaved between them.

David had forgotten that cities smelled of horse long before they ever smelled of cars. Fez smelled of sweet sawdust, musty flour, drying dung, kif (sweet as hay), the tang of curing hides and sour urine.

Rashid never slackened his pace, turning adroitly this way and that until they came on an open space between fallen buildings dominated by a great ruined waterwheel. A footbridge crossed a rushing stream and over the steep bank opposite they delved into more lanes lit now by tiny shops until Rashid darted down a dark alley and pushed open a studded door into a large dim courtyard.





The house or palace, for not only was it spacious but it wore an air of faded regal grandeur and had obviously known better times, was built on tiers, each verandahed floor teetered perilously over the courtyard below, while the house as a whole leaned for support on the ample shoulders of the Karouine mosque next door, decorated with green tiles and gleaming minarets.

Rashid completely ignored the women gathered round a well in the centre of the court and climbed up an unlit crumbling staircase. Off a verandah on the third floor he indicated a narrow cubicle just wide enough for a bed. There was no window. As he started to leave, his duty completed, he had second thoughts and announced with a quaint formality, ' Veut tu voyer la ville. Je suis petit guide.' He clearly intended this as a business suggestion.

After traveling all day by bus and changing at Quazzane, which happened to be market day, David had no interest left for anything but to eat and sleep. Quietly but firmly he said, 'I would like to eat.' Adding, 'You too. I'll pay for us both.'

But Rashid only retreated into his usual shrug reciting 'Je fais le guide. J'en caisse une commission sur les achats des tourist dans les boutiques Marocain.'

David by this time had had enough of Rashid's hospitality and decided he'd do better surviving on his own. But Rashid declared he'd never find his way back and set off briskly only to find the passage blocked by the mule carrying David's baggage. The porter unstrapped the bags and carried them up to the room but when David thanked him and paid he found Rashid regarding him in some surprise.

'You speak Arabic from the gutter. What are you?'

'I'm not quite sure,' David said truthfully and Rashid grinned for the first time. 'Would you like to see my pigeons,' he suggested and led the way up to the roof.

Each evening the inhabitants of Fez rose to the surface of their city and relaxed on the rooftops. Hutches of chickens, rabbits, sheep and goats also inhabited



these upper regions and here too Rashid kept his pigeons. He released them from his hands and they flew in widening circle over the deep darkening pool of the city below, their wing tips almost touching. The turmoil of the city was hidden down narrow crevices. All around them the flat rooftops gleamed white in the iridescent twilight. Back swooped the two pigeons only to soar away again.



Staring after them Rashid nodded solemnly and announced 'They are a present from my sister who is married to Benjamin. I am sixteen. My birthday is at the Feast of the Eid.'

The pigeons came swooping back and after locking them up they descended into the house where Rashid drew David aside, threw open two massive doors, pushed aside heavy drapes and switching on the light presented him to a long high ceiling throne room, formally decorated and scrupulously polished, over which an elegant framed photograph ruled with severe dignity.

'My father,' declared Rashid. 'Dead. He smoked sixty cigarettes a day and his lungs were all black. Pauvre Rashid,' he added with theatrical selfpity as he led the way out. Running down the unlit stairway Rashid stopped suddenly and when David bumped into him he kissed him quickly and squeezed his hand. 'My brother,' he said. Then he let go and continued racing down into the courtyard.

Once again they were out among the tight alleys darting this way and that, dodging mules and people until they came to a crowded restaurant with soup brewing in a great urn and kebabs spitting over charcoal embers. A big tagine of mutton for both of them to share was swiftly brought and Rashid whose solemn expression became beautiful when he smiled, inquired, 'Tu es content?' 'He looked serious again and frowned. 'You like girls?'

David nodded vigorously having just scalded his tongue.

'Moi,' declared Rashid with the air of a savant, 'I prefer les putons. (whores)'

The trouble when coming from Tangier with its unsavory reputation is that you are expected to know all about such things. Perhaps it was the Gomorrah of Africa in the good-old-bad-old days of the International Zone, and certainly with typical tangerine generosity and not wishing to disappoint foreign expectations tourists were still offered all sorts of baroque combinations not excluding the donkey. But these things didn't take place in the respectable



alleyways of the Kasbah, (not that Jim would have minded, as he was certainly not keeper to anyone else's morals.) As a result although David could assume a man-of-the-world attitude it wouldn't take long to spot his regrettable ignorance. He hastened to change the subject and as he was tired and dusty he asked if they might go to a hamam (steam baths).

Rashid brightened at this and led the way along more alleys until they entered low door into a communal changing room where they deposited their few belongings at the desk and carefully taking off their clothes (Moroccans are very prudish in public), they wrapped large damp cotton towels round their middles and set off into a series of hot, steamy cellars, the stone floor slimy and the air thick as mud.



Gaunt 'slaves' in loin-cloths dragged around wooden tubs of scalding water. As they washed and massaged their victims they uttered strange hissing sounds with tongue and teeth. Rashid ordered water and the two of them were soaped and scraped, the dirt coming out of David's skin in a thick scum, but he rejected offers to shave his body hair. Only recently acquired, he was rather proud of it.

Outside their faces smarted in the cool air but they both felt refreshed and taking David's arm in friendship Rashid walked them back. 'You like girls?' he suggested once again.

'Yes. Of course,' David felt at a disadvantage. Apart from pictures he wasn't even sure how they were made. 'We to Moulay Yacoub,' Rashid announced. 'There you can have any girl you want. Girls thirteen, any age. I got sick there once after embracing a girl.'

The delicate use of 'embrace' surprised David. 'Did you go to a Doctor?'

'Doctors are no use. I was cured by the waters. People come a long way, even from Algeria and they get cured of everything. Look, this is the Grand Mosque.'

David peered into an endless stately parade of ornate pillars and arches lit by chandeliers and carpeted with rush matting where old men sat quietly reciting from their Koran's while others taught their sons and grandsons. Then the mullah started chanting and an usher strode up to them. 'Salah,' he ordered, 'Pray.'



They had to obey and taking off their shoes stepped forward with the rest, getting down their knees, bowing their heads to the ground and then rising together to chant the shahadah, the muslim creed.' I believe in one God and Mohammed is his prophet.' To David it never seemed so very different to what was said at St Andrews. They collected their shoes and set off into the souks. When people spoke of Fez they either meant a hat or the souks, and these lived up to their rather macabre reputation.

To David it was like entering a sinister underworld where daylight never came, a dungeon world lit by flares and beaten sparks, and the luminous glow of molten metal. Here like children of the damned, day and night small and grimy boys hammered at anvils, worked bellows, fed furnaces, tapped designs into brass and silver trays, pounded out tin pots, wrought molten ingots into sudden practical shapes, and here too lean men in nothing but dirty cloths treaded wool and hides in pits of coloured dyes.

David began to wonder if he too would become imprisoned and fettered here for the rest of his days like those thousands of Christians entombed in the dungeons of Meknes, but Rashid darted up a tunnel and emerged through a massive gate outside the high walls of the city.

Like coming out of a cave David was delighted to see stars overhead. Around them mounds of black olives lay waiting to be spaded into carts and beyond rose a hillside of sepulchral tombs curiously draped by tanned hides.

Near the gate, outside the tiny hutch where he lived the night watchman warmed himself over a brazier of glowing charcoal. He hailed Rashid, for they were old friends. The night watchman had a liking for bottled beer which he obtained with difficulty from the new (French) town. Rashid produced a packet of kif and they all sat together smoking in companionable silence.

Later, sitting on the edge of David's narrow bed Rashid enquired 'Are you happy?' Then reassured added, 'where shall we travel together? The seas, the Sous, the desert, the camel markets at Goulmina, the oasis at Zagora. Shall we go over the snows of the Tiz-n-test pass?'

David nodded vigorously at these exciting suggestions

'First we go to Moulay Yacoub.'

'Jim said I should try to see Volubilis.'

'Volubilis and then Moulay Yacoub. Goodnight my brother.'

David lay in the pitch darkness with that replete feeling of friendship warm inside. As he settled to sleep in that ancient house thrust up centuries before among the roots of Fez, he wondered if Jim had realized where he was sending him. Probably.

Scarcely had the mullah welcomed in the dawn than Rashid was banging on the door, and although David would have happily stayed in bed much longer he got up and followed him yawning out of the house.

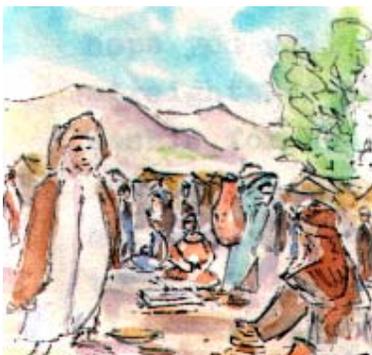


A herd of goats were being milked in the street and they stopped to drink a glassful each before setting off across the city to the new (French) town. They never reached Volubilis that day or the next. First they had to visit all Rashid's married sisters who made a great fuss of him apart from a general criticism about his not going to school. (David maintained a discreet silence about all that!) Then Rashid decided they should visit his farm and persuaded Benjamin, one of the husbands and also an architect away from his drawing board, to drive them there in his small Renault.

Stalked by cloud shadows the road north rose and fell over drab, dun-colored hills. Sometimes they bounced through barren watercourses or dusty villages where children waved, hens scattered, hobbled donkeys brayed and the camels continued with infinite patience to haul the water-wheel of the well.

In the late morning they stopped at a weekly market where two roads crossed because Benjamin was unable to resist the chance of a bargain. In a large enclosure vigorous bargaining for every sort of livestock was taking place while outside tents had been pitched under a row of acacia trees and in between were heaped clay pots charcoal, bales of cloth, eggs, potatoes. Dressed in patched djellabahs and bright shawls the crowds were busy shouting at the top of their voices or sitting under the tent awnings sipping mint tea.

Fifteen kilometers or thereabout later they reached the farm. A dirt track crossed the Sebou River and wore itself out in impassable ruts. They got out and climbed a steep slope waisthigh in thistles to a huddle of whitewashed mud brick buildings, the low thatch roofs smeared all over with clay. The tenant, a gaunt man in a threadbare brown djellabah was waiting and made elaborate salaams. His wife who had been snapping sticks for the bread oven bowed and kissed their hands.



Once inside Rashid unbolted the shutters and through the grille David saw the land they had driven through suddenly become lovely. Below the slope lay the blue flash of river as bright as a kingfisher in those dust whitened hills. Swallows fell like darts and clouds puffed the sky. Dust blew in and they closed the shutters but Rashid went outside and came back with handfuls of wild narcissus.



Their tangy scent sweetened the room. The man pulled across an old mattress for them all to sit on. The room was bare; a large urn occupied an angle, a tin clock ticked on a shelf, a cheap transistor radio hung on a nail hissing out tinny tunes, a cracked car mirror was fixed to the wall.

The woman came in bearing a dish of spiced beans and carrots with flaps of fresh warm bread to eat it with. The man insisted they all eat saying simply, 'You are my guests. God brought you. Today is blessed.' Neither the wife nor the children joined them but a girl came in to remove the dish and bring in tea things. She kept her head lowered but an infant son with a runny nose peeped round the doorway to watch.

It was late afternoon before they departed. The man proudly presenting his timid son, but the pretty girl stayed apart, her legs scratched, her dress in rags, dirty and disarmingly beautiful.

Shadows were lengthening over the derelict hills and by the time they reached the crossroads the market had packed up and the road ahead lay in deep twilight. For a little while they continued to pass carts, donkeys and foot travelers but these thinned-out and Benjamin drove with reckless gait along the empty road until suddenly the inevitable bicycle wobbled crazily out from the unseen verge.

They stopped. There was nobody else about. Tossed into a field they discovered an elderly man clutching his leg. They all wanted the man and the bicycle to vanish, or for him to jump up, smile and pedal away. Instead he lay there moaning despite Benjamin's assurance his leg was not broken. 'I'm an architect,' he said knowledgeably. 'I understand these things.'

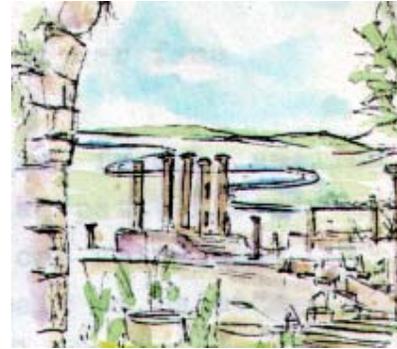
With Rashid's help he pulled off the man's Wellington boots and prodded the leg. The moans became groans. Some vestige of respect they wished they no longer possessed linked them to him when they really just wanted to drive away and forget it had ever happened. After all what was he to them? Just someone they happened to collide with on the road.

'You are very lucky,' confirmed Benjamin, 'It's not broken. I hope you will drive more carefully in future.' Then while David straightened the bicycle as best he could, he and Rashid forced back on the rubber boot, propped the man on his bicycle and launched him off downhill not entirely certain if it was the way he wanted to go.



At the next village they stopped at a meat stall. A cow had just been slaughtered and the butcher was rinsing blood off the carcass. Benjamin's cheerfulness, dampened by the earlier incident was fully restored as he haggled over prices.

'Better to buy meat at night,' he joked when they left. 'Fewer flies.' He examined the dent in the mudguard, sighed and drove on.. Rashid started to sing.



For the next two days they worked as tourist guides (unofficially), David suitably equipped with Jim's best clipped-English accent touted trade outside the hotels and Rashid organized the tours and between them they did rather well in fees and commission from stores, but Rashid's shoes were fast disintegrating under the strain and the official guides were looking threatening so when at his customary hour of darkness (even the roosters were still asleep) Rashid thumped on David's door, it was something of a relief to hear him announce, 'A Volubilis, messieurs.'

At the gate Rashid's night watchman friend came out of his hutch and accosted several early trucks before he found one to take them in the direction they wanted. Volubilis was not so very far away but first they had to help load a cargo of cooking gas cylinders and then stop for breakfast (oranges and hard boiled eggs) at a road side halt.

They seemed to be the only visitors. Volubilis was a ghost town where sheep cropped between the ruins and droppings speckled the magnificent mosaic floors. They strolled among the broken colonnades and Rashid immortalized himself by scratching his name on a pillar.

Volubilis had died as it lay looking out over an ample plain. No Poseidon came leaping out of its past to fix him with its stare. Silence covered every trace like a shroud. A stray goat bell tinkled in mockery. From the overlooking hills white-walled Moulay Idriss squatted like a sated toad keeping satisfied watch over the ruins it had plundered.



The way to Moulay Yacoub lay across low hills. A rutted track crawled. Between tall spears of 'Spanish bayonets' out from which David easily imagined that dinosaurs might lumber. But nothing bigger than sheep grazed the stones and only goats clambered into the lower branches of the olive trees adding their droppings to the fat black fruit littering the ground below.



It was late afternoon before they reached Moulay Yacoub, as they walked down the steps to the pools a woman came out of a hut and grabbed them each by an arm. She was thin and wild as a gypsy, her fingers and face were tattooed with henna. 'Bon Soir,' she said, smiling gold teeth and gaps. 'Vous aimez les petites. J'ai tous, j'ai tous.' And releasing one spiny hand she beckoned in from the shadows a pair of painted waifs, their eyes ringed with kohl who tried hard to grin in an alluring fashion but broke into giggles instead. 'Aussi les jeunes filles,' offered Madame, and against the darkness David could make out slightly older versions of the- same product. To his surprise Rashid seemed reluctant. 'Perhaps when we return,' he dismissed in a rather offhand manner.

Madame Gypsy shook her head knowingly. 'My dears always better play first. Afterwards you can bathe.' Then she added with a wink. 'But of course if you prefer boys. I can help too.' But before she had the opportunity to present her latest suggestion for their inspection she spied more likely clients approaching.

Released from her enticements they ran down the steps into a strong tang of sulphur while from the pool came the sound of chants and disorganized cries. Only the sign 'INFERNO' was lacking. As they changed David wondered if even in the underworld there wasn't someone to hand out tickets and store away your clothes for the duration of your visit.

An early moon rose out of the green twilight over a biblical army of the maimed chanting to Allah as they struggled through the steaming yellow waters. Palsied limbs. syphilitic sores, cauterized nerves all competed for the benevolence of the miraculous cure. Splashing and gasping they surged about the pool or lay stranded on the edges victims of the masseurs who wrestled to straighten their contorted limbs, grunting and hissing at each rhythmic press.



The source, when David reached it was an open wound in the rock where the healing waters came gushing out hot and thick as ramadam soup. David felt almost guilty to be healthy and Rashid looked radiant, his skin glowing, his hair stuck back on his forehead.

When they finally emerged smelling faintly of brimstone David felt quite light-headed and with an hour to wait for the next bus they went and sat under a grove of orange trees near the road.

The last flush of sunset left the horizon and the mauve mountains settled down on their haunches for the night into the blackened plains. David lay back under the laden boughs his head pressed among dank pungent marigolds. Suddenly Rashid leaned over and kissed him fiercely his hair wild against David's eyes but at that moment a bell jangled almost on top of them and they looked up to find a man wheeling his bicycle through the orchard thumbing the bell and offering cheerful suggestions of encouragement. David couldn't help laughing but realizing Rashid thought he was laughing at him and not wanting to hurt his feelings he hugged him instead to show he was laughing for joy and because it was so funny.

'Merde.' protested Rashid ,feeling in his pockets. 'I have lost my money. 'He jumped up shouting for the bicycle man to stop so they could borrow his lamp and search for the coins that had slipped out of his pocket.

It was almost Christmas before they finally set out for Marrakech. The previous night they attended the wedding of one of Rashid's cousins. The whole alley had been festooned with electric light bulbs and the lower floor of the great house thronged with male guests. (The women were all at the bride's house in another part of the city.) The feast was far more extravagant than David expected. Brass platters at least a yard across were carried in heaped high with chickens roasted in almonds, steaming mounds of cous-cous and vast taglines of mutton and rice sprinkled with olives and raisins which they plundered with piping hot fingers, licky and greasy. Outside a crowd of poor people made merry in the alley waiting for the ample leftovers.

After the feasting came music,- drums, pipes, tambourines, with one musician sawing away at a three- stringed lute until his fingers were white with rosin. Dancing to this accompaniment were a harem of over-ripe courtesans. Bare midriffs bulging flashily out of gilded girdles, they swayed and twisted suggesting just what paradise might be found within the roundabouts of their whirling thighs. Twirling fingers flashed silver castanets and bellies waggled as they butted their golden crutches into the faces of the older wealthier guests who grinned sheepishly and tucked banknotes into the brass links on their loins.





Rashid and David had been eating 'marjoun', a spicy concoction of honey and hashish, raisins and spices that they swallowed in euphoric spoonfuls and climbing up to the roof swapped their arms for wings and eyes for stars and soared magnificently over the pale roof-tops of the city.

Next morning Benjamin had to drive to Quazzarzate to visit relatives. They left early, blowing on their hands to keep warm, the ground blanched with, hoar-frost and the sun streaming across the valley. Soon they were climbing among forests of cedar and pine, snow sprinkled under the trees. Then the forest thinned and the road twisted on up between contorted barrages of colored rock.

Here and there ragged wayside boys held out pieces of coloured crystal to sell. Benjamin stopped to examine these handfuls of amethyst and porphyry, quartz and agate always offering prices too pitiful to be ever accepted

Coming over the crest of the Rif they entered a snow-covered upland speckled here and there by hummocks of fir trees. Only slay-bells and reindeer were missing from this Christmas card wonderland that carried them gracefully across to the other side of the plateau and, dropped them tumbling down red sandstone cliffs to the desert spreading out into the distance far below.

After driving across rust-red dirt for some time the flat hazy horizon was penetrated by what Benjamin explained was an aluminum smelting plant. All around the land had been grubbed up to feed the appetite of this metal monster that towered over the neat bungalows of its servants.

Benjamin's older brother Hassan was director of all the schools in this barren district and here they rested, ate and slept; the iron stove glowing red hot to keep the frozen night outside at bay.

At dawn they were introduced to the driver of a small truck that was leaving for Marakesch and set off through the bleak grey desert tucked amid bales and trying to escape the smarting wind. The rising sun made things seem more cheerful if not immediately warmer. Once again they turned back towards the Rif negotiating a lower, southern pass that lifted them effortlessly onto the western plains beyond.

Accompanied by mountains the road passed south through red plains patched with green plantations. Riverbanks lay brightly daubed with drying laundry. Eucalypt trees fanned small villages where they dawdled, pausing to eat kebabs freshly grilled; tearing them off the skewers with their teeth and stuffing them down with wads of soft warm bread.



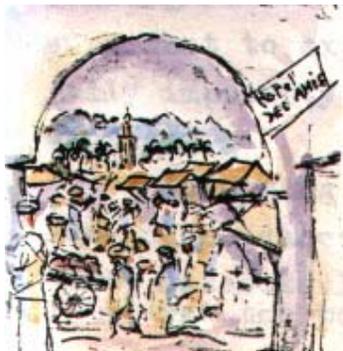


They continued through the tilting shadows of late afternoon, the road busy with donkey carts, and motor bicycles, the mountains higher moving away eastwards, the long plain darkening. Out from the felted twilight jumped sudden trees, villages rushed them in surprise and bridges sprang across quick-silver rivers. Then came only long intervals of nothing when even the mountains sank under the sea of night.

Marakeech begins and ends with palm trees that suddenly part like a curtain and reveal ramparts, roads, galloping cabs with candle headlamps, overloaded buses all rushing down avenue Mohammed V lined with its dusty orange trees towards the empire-state silhouette of the Koutubia tower.

Here on the edge of the Djama el'fna square David and Rashid got stiffly down to be straightway run over by swaying cabs full of veiled ladies, the air snapping with the crack of whips. Shouldering their bags they made their way through the great jostling square and it was like stepping into the camp of a medieval army swarming with camp followers. A 'one night' city where a thousand lamps shadowed an armada of tents and stalls, the air thick with smoke and the aroma of countless field-kitchens. Every space thronged with hooded figures; Negroes, blue men from the Sous, milk white turbans from the southern deserts, grey djelabas from the Atlas mountains, and brown burnouses of berbers.

The night cried with a dozen dialects, prayer chants echoed from the mosques, a file of blind beggars linked hand to hand rattled their begging bowls and sang with sightless faces, the crippled and deformed grabbed at passing legs shrieking 'alms', horses neighed staling and frothing in their shafts, quack doctors intoned the merits of their cures. They passed a row of women bread sellers crying 'hobbs', their white veils grotesquely daubed with rouge, and the muffled moan of a man having a tooth extracted, sitting in a deck-chair under an umbrella with a tray of old fangs as witness to the surgeon's success at pulling. Into this great carnival filtered tributary streets of low buildings many advertising the message 'hotel'. Rashid settled for one with a guardian lying on a mat across the door and shabby rooms opening onto a dusty courtyard as overgrown as a hothouse.



A window patched with cardboard peeped through encrusted dirt to the trunk of a palm tree six inches away, a cracked sink occupied a corner with dripping tap and severed waste-pipe. A bumpy double bed with a torn sheet and a grey blanket filled the room. They paid in advance for this lodging and retraced their steps over the snoring guardian back to the bustling square where they suppered at various stalls, spooning down soup from one and kebabs and tomato salad at another, eating figs and sticky dates somewhere else and finally ducking under an awning to sip scalding mint tea at a table festooned with kif pipes.



Replete and strangely jubilant they walked slowly back, the risen moon glowing in a pale aureola over the mountains and the Kutubia stark and black above the palm trees. From the wheeling mob a girl challenged them in a broad American accent. ‘Hey, can you tell me where the carol singing is?’

‘Comment?’ inquired Rashid

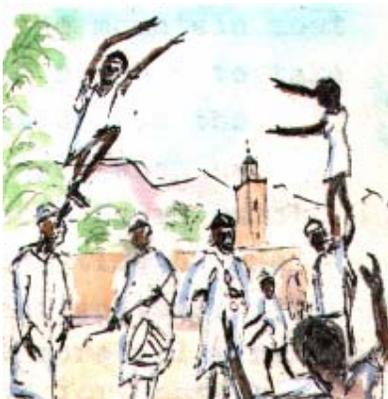
David translated wondering if Rashid had ever heard of Christmas. He shrugged and the girl moved off to ask elsewhere, the desperate need to find something familiar clear in her expression. David had completely forgotten it was Christmas Eve and the idea of carols here seemed utterly alien. Yet somehow it felt here and now like the first Christmas of all; the desert close by, the crowded market, no one else knowing anything about it, a peasant baby born in a stable. God coming to his people.

From the Kutubia the amplified voice of the mullah cried, ‘Allah akbar-God is great, God the truthful, the beneficent, the merciful.’

‘Come.’ David said suddenly. ‘I want to buy you a present.’

‘Pour quoi?’ Rashid looked wary.

‘Come on.’ And David pulled him towards the narrow alleys of the souks. They were different from Fez, here low with rush mats spread on frames to keep out the sky. David had only fifty diners and he wondered what part of Rashid’s wardrobe to start on. Just then they passed several booths selling shoes and although Rashid shrugged noncommittally he yielded into trying some on until he found a sturdy pair that fitted. They left his old ones in the gutter. Between them they had almost ten dirham left. David hoped Jim would arrive as planned on the 26th.



Next morning David woke to the persistent rhythm of drums and leaving Rashid asleep went out into the square not sure what to expect. To his surprise he found the daily impromptu circus already warming up in bright sunlight.



Occupying the front of the square were Negro dancers, -boys and young men all dressed in white hassocks leaping and dancing to the beat of the drummers. The boys somersaulted high into the air landing on each other's shoulders. Around them all sorts of other activities were in progress; a herbalist implored the doubtful to buy his latest elixir, a card sharper exploited a trick that looked impossible to lose except all his clients did, forfeiting their dirhams. The raggletaggle crocodile of the blind chanted past rattling their tins, a snake charmer waited patiently for interest, his snakes coiled idly on old sacks, a small boy sang and a medley of musicians - their cheeks bulging, blew at horns and pipes. Already the tented stalls were cooking up urns of steaming winkles, grilling sardines and kebabs, wafting out scents of mint tea, spices, kif. All part of the heady aroma of the djama el'fna funfair.

David sipped sweet coffee before returning to their room where Rashid was still asleep. Suddenly he remembered it was Christmas Day. He thought of the service at St Andrews and wondered where Jim would be eating his Christmas dinner.

Their own consisted of doughnuts and ice cream out at the Menara gardens, an oasis of olive trees beyond the mud walls of the city where palm trees petered out and goats and camels grazed on the grassy 'bled' that vanished into the distance to be swallowed up by soaring snow-capped mountains.

Cabs cantered past full of families going picnicking in the gardens but when they got there David found these modern pleasure seekers a poor exchange for the past when the sultan relaxed in his summer pavilion above the lake, sipping sherbet and caressing his concubines.

Jim didn't arrive until late and they didn't see him until the next morning on the terrace of his room at the Mamounia Hotel overlooking the orange trees in the spacious gardens. They had quite a lot to say; or rather David did pausing only to introduce a wide-eyed Rashid to the Austin when they drove to the Cafe Renaissance. Here Jim introduced both of them to his old friend Field Marshal Auchinlech, 'The Great Auk' as Jim called him, who came in every morning at 11 o'clock to take his coffee. 'You'd never believe he's over ninety,' Jim said later. The next day both David and Rashid were banished to the mountains to learn to ski. Unfortunately a thick mist blanked out the view most of the time and as for the skiing Rashid refused to take more than one lesson during which he astonished the instructor by his ability to fall down even when he was



standing still. Although he persevered David wasn't sure Rashid enjoyed the visit. Most of the time he was engaged in an angry battle of wits against whatever 'djnn' was pushing him off balance, and he grew more and more bruised and irate as the days passed. Fortunately they returned with neither breaking anything to find Jim all ready for a trip south into the Sous country, land of the blue men.

The set out over the same plains that Jim had crossed on horseback so many years before. Now in winter the 'bled' lay under a bloom of flowers; mauve and white and pink, soft ephemeral colors smelling sweet as hyacinth. On new grass scattered among the stones sheep were fattening for the festival of Eid. Reaching the Old Portuguese citadel of Essaurira they stayed the night in a small hotel below the ramparts and breakfasted off freshly caught sardines grilled over charcoal in the harbour.

South of Essaurira they drove through a wilderness of dunes flanked by flying tamarisk, and rocky wastes of argan trees. At Tamara they stopped to eat kebabs and at Tarazout they swam in the warm white combers the sea glittering all the way down to Agadir.

At Agadir they had dinner with another old chum of Jim's, who at ninety six still drove his somewhat battered Renault car around the town. He was attended by a devoted, brass-buttoned Moroccan manservant but what impressed David was the fact that his father had been born in 1799. 'At that rate,' said Jim, 'His own grandfather probably fought at the Battle of Hastings.'

South of Agadir the road turned inland onto a plain that dried out to dust and stones. The straightforward directions marked so clearly on the map vanished at the first cross roads and with no signposts or anyone about to ask the way they chose tracks that wandered with any sense of urgency across the desert, following dried river beds and hollow gorges into mountains that were probably the Anti-Atlas only they weren't sure.

The sun went down while they were stranded in the middle of a patch of thorn desert with no obvious way out when, peering through the dusk, they saw sheep and goats shepherded by small boys in long djellabahs who came running towards them and gleefully led them to their encampment.



Even in the poor light David could see they were among the blue men, their skins stained by the dyes of their djellabahs. They were welcomed to share the nomads 'salt' ('means they won't rob us in the night,' murmured Jim). Mint tea was prepared, a goat was killed in their honor and water drawn from skins to wash hands and prepared couscous. They feasted well around the nomads fire, the women with them, laughing and unveiled, decorated with gold and silver bangles and strange blue lines ornamenting their faces, Jim delighted everyone and there was much merriment. A man played his pipe another beat rhythm on a drum and two boys were persuaded to sing.



In the morning after breakfasting on goat's milk they were directed towards a walled village an hour away where they would find a route to take them back to Taroudant. When they reached this village they entered the gateway to find a camel being hacked to pieces in the street. Men were chopping at it with axes slowly severing its neck and limbs and all the while it lay on its haunches in a steaming pool of blood and guts uncomplainingly gazing out through heavy lidded eyes. Flies descended like a dust storm on the slabs of dripping meat that were instantly squabbled over by the meat-hungry crowd.

It was late afternoon before they reached the oasis of Taroudant in the lee of the mountains. They camped outside the walls near the Gendarmerie, and over the feathery tops of the palm trees David watched the rugged snow capped peaks of the High Atlas waiting for them to cross. Next morning for more than an hour the road skirted the foothills before plunging into them. David's imagination proclaimed it perfect Red Indian country where at any moment you could expect to see a long line of feathered braves cresting the skyline, before they came war whooping down, tomahawks flying. When they finally reached the mountain wall it seemed unlikely either the road or the old car would make it over. But undeterred the dirt road crept ahead in never ending zigzags while the Austin embraced the tortuous turns as if it was dancing the polka, leaving spread out in its wake far below the whole of Africa for their inspection. (David only hoped it wouldn't get so steep they'd have to go up backwards) Then all at once they became confident. The car was going to make it; the road wasn't going to fall off a precipice. Jim sang Jerusalem and then Tipperary and they sped on up from one chorus to the next. All at once Africa became the Arctic and the Austin glided in a stately fashion over the snowy top of the Tiz-n-Test pass, steam billowing from its radiator. While the car got its breath back an old man waved them into his remote hut where he fried them eggs over a roaring stove and they sipped scalding tea. Once again they were off, downhill now, trying not to slip on the snow, following a gorge that wound its way out under cliffs and tumbling rock falls until far below they saw trees.



Streams tumbled together in torrents, fortified houses hung onto handfuls of terraced earth, fruit trees and children waved. Like a pinball they were bounced from one spur to another, fell into thick forests and careered across crevices until suddenly they glimpsed the plains far below and the Kutubia topping the palm trees along the horizon. Sitting at the Cafe Renaissance with his pal, the Great Auk, Jim remarked. 'Does Rashid want to get back to Fez?'

'It's his birthday next week and he wants to be home for the Eid.'

'Why not go with him. You'll like that.'

'When are you coming back?'

'In the spring I expect. I can never tolerate Tangiers before April.'

David noticed he was watching him rather carefully. 'Tell me,' he went on. 'How do you feel about going to Italy. I don't suppose you know much about it?'

'You used to go there each summer to paint, didn't you?'

He nodded. 'There's this artist friend of mine quite mad. They all are, you know. Calls himself Carlo Pittore- Charles the Painter, like Evans the bread or Jones the post, except he's American not Welsh. Has this tower in a village in the middle of nowhere. Up in the mountains surrounded by wolves and suchlike. I think perhaps we ought to pay a visit to see it hasn't fallen down. How do you feel about that? Not yet of course. In the spring when it's warmer.'

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Three months later as the ferry pulled out of Tangiers Bay, the excitement of their preparations over and the hills of Africa slipping away behind David suddenly felt desperately sad to be leaving. Fiercely he wanted to go back. He didn't need Europe. Morocco was his home, his friends, the house at Number Naught, Rashid's crumbling palace in Fez.

He saw the pigeons flying over the rooftops that day they parted; following the laden mule up the steep alleys, Rashid as silent as that first day he had followed him down. Near the Bab el Guisa gate a funeral procession passed, a small group of men carrying a carpeted coffin and chanting briskly. In their imaginations they both watched Rashid's father being buried again.

The afternoon before they had climbed out of the city to sit under an olive tree on the stony hillside surrounded by patches of blue iris. Rashid looked at David a long time. 'I love you,' he said. 'I love you as a brother.'

They shook hands beside the bus as the soothsayers, blind men and beggars all climbed aboard chanting for alms. Rashid touched his knuckles to his chest, to his lips, his eyes not leaving David's. And he didn't say another word as the bus pulled away. He was wearing just the same clothes as the first time David saw him waiting there; the grey jacket with the torn pocket . A small figure in a huge landscape. A figure frozen within a mosaic. A way of life, a way of love, irrevocably lost. My brother Rashid.

