I had exactly sixteen dinars when I arrived in Baghdad, and it was to last for two weeks. This proved later to be an optimistic estimate, for the first advance on my salary was not paid until six weeks had passed. Even for two weeks sixteen dinars was not a large sum for a stranger in a big city, so I thought I should be careful with my funds and go to a cheap hotel.

I told the taxi-driver to take me to a good hotel. He did. He took me to the Shahrazad which had a pleasant front with a garden. Leaving my things in the car I walked in to the reception desk. It was very hot in the street. But as soon as I entered the lobby a damp cool breeze blew on my face. I immediately had misgivings about the rates, and the receptionist confirmed them.

The driver was not surprised when I got into his car again. I said: "Too expensive. Take me to a good hotel which is cheaper." "Yes sir," said he and started. Some hundred yards down he turned into a side-street and stopped. I got out and saw a doorway that had not been swept for the last twelve months. So I turned to the driver.

"This is dirty. Something better, please," I said and got into the car.

As the car started he said, "This is a good hotel. I bring many people here."

He drove for about three more minutes and landed me at another entrance very much like the previous one.

"Listen to me, sir," he advised. "You either go to the Shahrazad or to one of these hotels. There is nothing in
between. You will only pay 150 fils a night here, anyway.”

With an air of finality he got out, put my luggage on the
kerb, and walked with me up the steep stairs to the desk.
I was startled to be received by a bare-footed man who
had not shaved for some days. He beamed at the driver then
at me.

“I’ve brought you a friend, Shukri. Look after him,” the
driver said.

“Of course,” said Shukri. “Where is the luggage?”

In a few minutes the luggage was up and the taxi-driver
demanded one dinar. I gave him half a dinar and, though
he complained, he was not dissatisfied. Probably a quarter
would have been enough.

“And now my room, please,” I said to Shukri. It had
been a dusty night journey across the desert and I needed
a wash and a good meal.

Shukri took me to a room with two beds, but assured me
the other bed would be used by no other ‘traveller’ as long
as I was there. Guests were called ‘travellers’; in referring
to the hotel Shukri called it a ‘travellers’ inn’.

“There are plenty of travellers’ inns in this area,” he said,
“but very few of them provide you with the comfort that
you will find here.”

When I was left alone I discovered, to my horror, that the
bed sheets had been used. Many forms of poverty I could
tolerate, but to sleep in sheets used by some other ‘traveller’
was just beyond my powers of fortitude.

I went back hurriedly to barefoot Shukri and found him
talking to a tall dark woman, whose eyes were black-rimmed
with kohl. She was wearing a graceful black aba that rested
on her head and came down to her toes.

“Shukri,” I demanded, “will you change the bed sheets?”

“Sorry, sir,” he said, “I can’t today.”

“But they have been used.”

“Only once, last night. The new lot of sheets comes from
the laundry tomorrow.”

“Do you expect me to use those dirty ones?”

“They’re not too dirty, sir.”

The girl in the black aba told him to change them, but he
swore by God he couldn’t. A bell rang and he slithered away
to one of the rooms.

“A stranger?” the girl asked.

“Yes.”

“From Damascus?”

“No, Jerusalem.”

“Don’t worry, we look after strangers very well.”

She had a gold upper tooth which glinted each time she
opened her mouth.

“Thank you,” I said and went back to my room.

I rang the bell and a boy brought in my luggage. I
realised I had to find quarters elsewhere immediately. The
dark place in the midst of that October brilliance smelt of
the abuse of sullied nights and furtive days. I could imagine
what the bathroom was like in such a house of gloom.
Therefore, without having the sorely needed wash, I went
out, locked the door and, on my way to the steep staircase,
met the gold-toothed girl standing at the desk. She could
have been a statue in ebony, a madonna without a child, an
Ishtar of Babylon: her face was so impassive, her stance so
motionless, her eyes so wide and black, that she evoked in
me a thousand associations. I climbed down the stairs, and,
at the entrance, looked up to see what the hotel was called.
Queen of Sheba was written in Arabic and English on a
yellow sign. Queen of Sheba! What would Solomon have
thought?

There were colonnades on both sides of the street. Tawdry
and haphazard, they stretched wilfully all the way down,
over angular shops with men sitting in the doorways, drink-
ing tea in small glasses, and people walking with a swagger that suggested the motions of the Arab cloak which few of them actually wore. I was struck by the strange dark faces, invariably blemished, pock-marked, or bearing the scar of a terrible boil that ate into their skin, across the cheek, in the middle of the forehead, on the side of the nose. It was like the imprint of some savage flower. Some days later I heard a young man express his longing to "pile his kisses upon the lovely 'spot' that adorned his sweetheart's jaw."

The street, with its erratic design and colour—the colonnade columns were never alike for long—seemed patchy, as if it had been built extempore. A tall, very dark policeman with a gaunt face stood against a column.

"Where is the main street, please?" I asked.

"This is the main street!" he answered with astonishment as if to say, "You don't think it's good enough?"

I looked out for hotel signs and presently there was a long row of them: Hotel of Flowers, Hotel of Happiness, Hotel of the Lily of Dawn, Good Morning Hotel; then a very modest sign: City Hotel. It had a long balcony over the street, and I liked the idea of sitting up there in the evenings to watch the flood of traffic rushing below.

The stairs I climbed were not so steep or numerous as those of the Queen of Sheba. I wondered why those hotels had no lobbies on the ground floor, then realised that they actually occupied the top stories only, since underneath them were the shops. After all, I was not entering the air-cooled Shahrazad, where I could envisage a garden looking out on the river, sparkling with clean waiters and pretty girls in sleeveless dresses.

There was a desk behind which a middle-aged man was dozing. He was not only barefooted; he was in his vest and underpants. I coughed, and he jumped to his feet.

"I want a room with one bed," I said curtly.

"Yes, sir." He had a face reminiscent of an ikon—but an old one, chipped and scratched. It was a face I liked immediately.

"I can give you a room on the northern side, but the windows are high," he said and showed me one. "Or a room over the street"—and he opened the door of one—"but it is a little too sunny. Of course you can draw the blind; the balcony-door has a blind too, and there is a wash-basin here. If you find it too hot I'll give you a fan."

"Do you have clean sheets?"

"I'll get you a clean pair right away."

He put out his head and called out "Yousef!" then spoke to Yousef, who had responded to the call, in a strange tongue.

"What language is that?" I asked.

"Assyrian," said he briefly and did not seem pleased with the question.

"Are you Christian?" I had thought Christians were too few to be found in their underwear running 'travellers' inns'.

"Yes."

"Chaldaean?"

"Yes." He looked as though he had made a confession that might displease me. But I was absurdly delighted. Chaldaean—three thousand years after Babylon!

"Do you have any luggage?" he inquired, as if to change the subject.

"It is at the Queen of Sheba Hotel," I answered.

He opened his eyes wide.

"Have you been there long?"

"No. I arrived an hour ago. I didn't like the place."

"I am glad. Did you see any women there?"

"Well. There was one—"
"Well, she was a prostitute," he said it with great confidence. "You probably didn't know."

Could I tell him what associations she had evoked?

"I rather suspected it," I lied.

Yousef appeared, and I had to suppress a laugh. A young man of about twenty-five, he came in dressed in his vest and underpants too, but he had sandals on, which emphasized the shagginess of his legs and knees. On outstretched forearms he solemnly carried some sheets as if they had been a holy manuscript and offered them to me for inspection. When I approved he set about making the bed and I went back to Solomon's Mistress to collect my bags. Shukri could have murdered me with his looks, but he got a full day's rent before I left him. The girl was not at the desk. Could she be in some 'traveller's' arms in that heat? I wondered.

When you arrive in a big city you are so excited that you do not deliberate too long about what hotel to stay in, because the streets are crying out to have you walk in them, and you feel an air of expectation about the city as if all these years it had been deckling itself out for your benefit. You want to rush out and see it all in an hour; and within that hour are compressed the adventures of your dreams. Nothing is so exhilarating as the sight of unknown buildings and unfamilar faces, after the eagerness that has worked up in you during the long journey and the longer preparations before it. And was Baghdad a big city? I had asked someone in Damascus. "It certainly is," came the answer. "There are fourteen cabarets in it."

I, however, on that first day of October, 1948, felt little exhilaration and less excitement on my arrival. It was not because I had seen London and Paris and Cairo and Damascus. I had forgotten my travels and could not remember what any city in the world looked like—any city, except one. Only one city did I remember, and remember all the time. I had left a part of my life buried under its rubble, under its gutted trees and fallen roofs, and I came to Baghdad with my eyes still lingering on it—Jerusalem.

Some eighteen months before, we had moved into our recently built house on the Katamon hill in New Jerusalem. The house was the fulfillment of my father's dream, and the result of a lifetime of toil and saving. On my return from England after World War II, I had chosen the spot myself on an eminence which on one side bordered on the hills of the country, and on the other on the beautiful road that wound its way to the heart of the city. But it also overlooked the Jewish quarter of Rehavia, whence I often saw from the balcony odd couples coming up and ringing our bell. They were attracted by the arched entrance, they said; by the geraniums on the white-stone staircase; by the three-pilled windows on the second floor which, catching the sun, rose like a flame over the valley. Did we let rooms? they asked. Sometimes we offered them coffee and they commented on my furniture and books, and left effusive with admiration for the 'Arab way of life'.

Next door to us lived the Shahins in a house twice as big as ours. They were a patriarchal family: the grandparents, the parents and the children made the house noisy and suggestive of tribal happiness, on which my brother and I commented freely in our quiet rooms. But hardly had two months passed before Leila Shahin, the eldest of the children, and I took eager notice of each other. The first few times we met we were as secretive about it as we could
be. We walked about the rocky unbuilt-up part of the hill in the dark, often defying the mad barking of stray dogs, until I said, "Look here, Leila, I love you, and I can't keep it secret any longer."

She had long chestnut hair always rather untidy, brown eyes, a large mouth and fair skin. We went for long drives in my small Morris, careful not to be seen by too many people. Two or three times I took her to a Jewish café in Rehavia where we could dance. Much to my surprise one evening her mother called on us, introduced herself and had a long chat with my mother. I understood. When she left I told her about Leila and she said, "Isn't it shameful of you both to have an affair behind our backs? Is that what you learned at Cambridge?"

"But I love her," I said.

"I will not hear such shameful talk. If you love her, do something about it. But remember, having just built this expensive house we've got no money left for a wedding just now. Besides, your father has been only eight months dead."

After that Leila and I met openly and our families exchanged visits. More often however we met when they could not see us, until Leila once said, "Will you ever kiss me enough? It's terrifying." And I said, "I want you like mad. We must get married soon. Will you come and live with us?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" she said jubilantly. "It's like going to the neighbours and not coming back ever after, isn't it?"

Some nights later we were woken up by a succession of violent explosions that rocked our house. Jewish terrorists had been killing the British for several years, blowing up government offices, army barracks, officers' clubs. Now they had started on the Arabs. United Nations had recommended splitting Palestine in two, and the terrorists were determined to achieve the bloody dichotomy. Barrels of T.N.T. were set off in market squares, killing about fifty people at a time, and now it was the beautiful white and rose stone houses of the Arabs they were after. When we went out, trembling with fear, to see what had happened, we saw three great heaps, about three hundred yards away, smoking into the cold air of early dawn. Some British soldiers were soon there to investigate the rubble.

Our quarter, being on the fringe, was in the grip of terror. Three or four people produced revolvers with which they said they would defend their homes. A villager offered me a rifle, an old German Mauser, with exactly five rounds. My brother bought it on the spot, but neither he nor I had ever fired a shot in our lives. The villager showed us how to fire, but we could not spare a single bullet for a live try.

That night we did not sleep. The terrorists did not come. Three nights later there was a mad howling storm. It thundered and rumbled and rain fell ferociously for hours. The power suddenly failed, and the whole quarter was in foul darkness. Every now and then the lightning gave us a glimpse of the hills through the uncurtained windows. The rifle stood on its butt in the corner.

Nothing could be heard but storm and thunder. And we dozed off, dressed in our overcoats. It was December. Then there was a blinding flash, and the house shook as in an earthquake, and the glass was blown in, crashing on the floor. I was stunned. My mother screamed. Yacoub dashed to the rifle in the corner and through the now paneless window tried to fire—at nothing that he could see, but he thought he had heard a car shooting off at the same time as the explosion. But no fire came out and he pulled the trigger again. The rifle might have been a toy. It jammed.

When I looked out, I cried in horror. The Shahins' house was a great heap of masonry, faintly perceptible through the black night. We ran downstairs and out into the howl-
ing wind. What could we do? In a few minutes other people came. We started turning the stones over to see if there was any life trapped underneath. “God, keep Leila alive, keep Leila alive,” I was saying to myself, and like a madman I skipped about the rubble and the great stones and the iron girders in vain hope. Then I felt something soft hit my hand. I dug it up. It was a hand torn off the wrist. It was Leila’s hand, with the engagement ring buckled round the third finger. I sat down and cried.

During the next day the engineers of the British Army unearthed eleven corpses piecemeal. Leila’s hand was returned to her battered body. One funeral was enough for the collective family burial.

What was I to do to the faceless anonymous enemy? In our impotence, unarmed and defenceless, we vowed revenge. But the quarter on the hill was open and exposed to the nocturnal terror, like a helpless supine woman. In twenty-four hours it was evacuated. We found a two-room house in nearby Bethlehem. We had not spent three nights in our new refuge when our house, pillars and all, was turned into another large weird mass of ruins. Yacoub and I went to see the iron girders sticking out of the wreckage and pointing twisted fingers to a cold blue sky. The ruins of blown up houses stood in a row, as in a nightmare.

Jerusalem was an embattled city. The most unorganised, the most unarmed collection of volunteers, trying to stop the fanning out of a highly organised, well-armed and ruthless force: a few erratic bullets against mines of gelignite. Soon the British Army left the fighters to their fate, and hell set into the vacuum on its trail. We were cut off from Jerusalem and the Arabs of the city took shelter behind the great Ottoman walls, where their rifles could keep off the armoured cars of the Jewish Skull Squadrons. Night and day were filled with gun-fire.

Arab villagers were massacred in the treacherous dark by men they had never seen, and nothing saved our town of Christ except the desperate volunteers who entrenched themselves in the hills and declivities around the town, and grimly waited and sniped and forayed and retired. We all bought our own rifles (I had to buy another one) despite the exorbitant prices (who knows what group trafficked with those rusty outmoded weapons and came out with fearful profits?), and we would take our positions in what we considered strategic points, to keep the enemy off until the Arab Legion came to the rescue. On clear nights, as we went down the terraces of the Valley of Bethlehem, I could not help wondering what diabolical irony made of such a lovely place, thick with olive trees, the scene of our ill-equipped defiance of hate. Where the angels had appeared to the shepherds two thousand years ago to sing of joy and peace to men, we daily faced the ever-spluttering messengers of death.

And time dragged and sorrow came upon sorrow without relief. Despite all our fears we had preserved a little hope, but each new day ate further into our hope. It was a war, we were told. It was the greatest practical joke in the world, and the most tragic one. There were armies; there were guns; there were generals; there were strategists; there were mediators. But the dislodged and the dispossessed multiplied. There was a truce, yet the refugees came in greater numbers. They carried their rags and their bundles, and buried their children unceremoniously under the olive trees. Amidst the wild flowers rested the torn pieces of flesh, human and animal inextricably twined. In the spacious courtyard of the Byzantine Church of Christ’s Nativity slept a tangle tattered mass of peasants and mules and camels, and only the braying of asses was louder than the hungry crying of the children.
In the town square an enterprising café proprietor had installed a battery radio with a loudspeaker. Wireless sets were becoming cumbersome pieces of furniture since the cutting off of power in New Jerusalem. So the people would congregate in thousands in the town square to hear the news on the small café radio, three times a day, at 8, at 2, at 6, and when the hour was announced by the broadcasting station with its usual six pips, a hush would fall upon the listening crowd, all eager for one item of good news. Every day at the appointed hours the thousands gathered in hope and fifteen minutes later dispersed in agony. “When Jerusalem is open again....” that was the phrase on every tongue. “When Jerusalem is open again....” They would climb up the mountain of Beit Jala to have a look at the city they loved spreading over the northern horizon in a haze of pale violet, no more than six miles away, but as good as a hundred thousand miles away, a city of dreams looming beyond a valley of death.

Summer had come. The thousands—they all seemed to have the same face and the same voice—who could not afford the rent which the limited number of available rooms in the small town had made exorbitant, had pitched their tents in the orchards and the vineyards and on the slopes of the hills. Some slept under the olive trees, which became a common habitation. Those who were lucky had a room for each family. We had managed to find two little rooms that had originally been one. In the morning friends and acquaintances would call on us bringing along their friends and acquaintances, and as the little coffee cups were passed round the interminable conversation twined in vicious circles. In the afternoon other people called and the same conversation was set gryating. Rumour was news. Wishful thinking was argument. Jerusalem would be internationised, the Jews would soon be defeated, the United Nations would certainly enforce its decisions. More houses had been blown up. More villagers slain. The Jews were using four-engine bombers. When were we to work and earn some money again? Should we stop the custom of serving coffee to guests? After all, we were together every day, we were no longer host and guest. And Abu Hilal’s prognosis would be dropped in our lap like a golden apple.

Abu Hilal dabbled in magic. He was a tall thin man with small piercing eyes and a mysterious air, who carried a heavy cane and went on long solitary walks. He charmed the illiterates with a medieval jargon interspersed with theological quotations. He spoke about primary and secondary principles, about chaining the devil and holding communion with the spirits from beyond. He had a ‘book’ which he consulted and which no one was allowed to see, they said. He made a prophecy: “At the ninth hour of the tenth day of the seventh month Jerusalem shall be open again.” Who would not believe him? Those who doubted it in his presence did so under their breath. When the forecast hour came without the projected relief a new prognosis had already been made. Abu Hilal had miscalculated the figures. The happy event was actually to be at the seventh hour of the tenth day of the ninth month.

Discussions and prognostications went on in every house, on every street corner. The farmer, the carpenter, the teacher, the priest, the bootblack, met and talked together. Everyone held opinions, all equally weighty. At first, most of us appeared with rifles slung across our shoulders and guns in our holsters. Day by day, however, the habit lost its force. We were in the hands of superior powers who organised the fight and relegated us to a useless background. Only Simon the Martyr (that was what everybody called him) had no use for weapons. His eyes were poor, and his tatters and periodic hunger made the possession of a very
costly rife impossible. Instead he had a lute. A very old and battered lute, but his own. He was our regular visitor. Not all the motley patches in the world—and he seemed to have them all on his few clothes—could dissuade him from telling a funny story to the most worried of assemblages. When everybody laughed he, being a natural artist, was flattered, and then there was no end to his stories. (Wherever did he get them all from?) Finally he would sit down, take his lute and tune it and, as he listened with an intent ear for the right pitch, his red moist eyes goggled as if they had seen visions. And then off he would go strumming and singing with a lift to which his body swayed. He might even stand up and dance to his own music, which earned him a good meal.

From one day to another the monotony was sustained, interrupted by occasional news of fresh rapine and slaughter. We were the prisoners of the little town. Cut off from the north by the Jews, if we wanted to go east we had to go through a tortuous, precipitous road in the arid mountains which had been built in haste to facilitate the movements of the Arab Legion of Transjordan. Where should we go east, anyway? Amman, capital of Transjordan, was already flooded with refugees. So was Damascus and so was Beirut. If we went south the Egyptians, who were still fighting, would not allow us an entry into Egypt. We were not allowed to fight—we had no ammunition, and nobody wanted us. The monotony, that repetitious ever-widening emptiness, was as devastating as the carnage itself. We organised a refugee committee, wrote petitions to the authorities on behalf of the homeless multitudes—we never knew exactly whether we should refer to the Egyptian or the Transjordanian authorities, both of whom had administrative control of the place. We wrote long letters in different languages to people abroad requesting aid: money, food, clothing, medicaments. And although I was the treasurer of the committee, I received exactly nothing to register in my books.

"It's now a question of primary needs," my brother Yacoub said. "We're gradually driven back to where the race started at the beginning of time."

"Whoever is behind this Jewish campaign, he must be awfully clever," I said. "They've changed the whole thing from a political issue to a 'refugee' issue. Very clever. Instead of worrying about the restoration of our land we have to worry about feeding the refugees."

"We've got to eat. Even our one decent meal a day is in danger. How much money have we still?"

"About thirty pounds."

"Well?"

"Back to the hunting stage," I said. "The trouble is there aren't enough wild animals around."

"Don't you think we'd better sell your Morris?"

"With those three big holes in it who would want to buy it?"

"It'll fetch fifty or sixty pounds."

"And we'll never go back to Jerusalem again?"

"What, to our mouldering pile of ruins in Katamon? It doesn't look like it."

"And Leila—Leila will remain unavenged—do you remember her hand—her lovely hand resting on a stone, without her arm, without her body?"

"For God's sake don't talk about it. We've suffered enough. More suffering may be waiting for us in the months to come. But we must be practical. We want life, however much death wants us for his own."

"Do we really want life?"

"Didn't you often say in the past, life is resilient and not easy to destroy?"
“I suppose I did, with a roof over my head—and a roof of my own at that. I could say it when I knew I was going out in the evening with Leila to send her crazy with love and talk. But now—ugh! When starvation looks you in the face you have to qualify your statements about life.”

That morning Father Isa called on us. We passed him the box with the cigarette paper and tobacco, and he rolled himself a cigarette. Cigarettes had disappeared, when suddenly the streets were full of stalls which sold loose brown tobacco and tiny booklets of cigarette paper, with gadgets for rolling the cigarettes. So we took to the custom of passing round the tobacco with the little roller to our visitors, and every guest manufactured his own cigarette.

“I can’t understand the West,” said Father Isa. “It is supposed to be Christian. Look what it is doing to Christians and to the land of Christ.”

“They’ve sold us out,” Yacoub said. “For thirty pieces of silver.”

“But how can they do this to the Holy City? How can they allow Jerusalem to fall into ruins under the hoofs of Zionist terrorists?”

“I know what you mean, father,” I said. “But may I ask you how you think of Jesus Christ?”

Father Isa was alarmed. He sipped at his coffee, took a pull at his cigarette, let out the smoke through his large grizzled moustache and beard, then said, “My son, I don’t know what you mean by your question. He is the Lord of Light, the Redeemer, the Comforter——”

“Very good, father. But I think of Christ as a man walking our streets with a haggard face and beautiful hands. I think of Him standing barefooted on our cobbles and calling all men to His love and His peace. I think of Him here, in these very streets and hills and houses and hovels. For me Christ is a part of this place. But how do you suppose they think of Him in the West? Do you suppose our Christianity is like theirs? When they sing of Jerusalem do you think they mean our own arched streets and cobbled alleys and terraced hills? Never. Christ for the West has become an idea—an abstract idea with a setting, but the setting has lost all geographical significance. For them the Holy Land is a fairy land. They have invented a fanciful Jerusalem of their own and made it the city of their dreams. But for us the geography is real and inescapable. When they sing of Jerusalem in their hymns they do not mean our city. Theirs is a paradise, ours is hell, Gehenna, the city of no peace. Nor is their Jerusalem the city of Christ any more. It is the city of David. What does it matter to them if our houses are destroyed, if a thousand Leilas are blown to bits and our city gates are turned into shambles? They’ve stolen our Christ and kicked us in the teeth.”

“No, my son, I don’t agree. They may kick us in the teeth, but they cannot steal our Christ from us.”

“For fifteen hundred years Christianity has been exclusively European. What have we, Arabs, Asians, Levantines, to do with it? We originated it, but the Greeks and the Romans took it away from us. All we have left of it is an antiquated set of rituals to which we have contributed nothing in a thousand years. What creative, civilising part has our Christianity played in the midst of a Moslem world? After the eighth century we should have surrendered ourselves completely to the new forces of Islam, not partially as we have done. So we have neither enjoyed the full benefit of belonging to our fatherland—don’t you hate the term ‘religious minority’, the survival of which is always to indicate the tolerance of the ‘religious majority’—nor have we distinguished ourselves by the creation of some great or even
different civilisation out of our different faith. Europe has always been afraid of the Moslem East—but the Christians in it, always looking out towards Europe until their necks have ached, have earned no more than its benign contempt. That is why the West will let Jerusalem fall into ruins under the hoofs of Zionist terrorists. Don’t think for a moment, father, they have any love for you. I tell you, they took our Christ from us and kicked us in the teeth.”

Father Isa looked at me in silence. At last he said, “You’ve puzzled me, I’m going back to pray.”

A few days after that I sold my car for £60, and went to Damascus where Palestinian teachers were being registered for employment in the neighbouring countries. I had a Cambridge degree with which, after inquiring and waiting and knocking on a dozen unsmiling doors, I managed eventually to secure a teaching post in a college in Baghdad. I left most of the money with my brothers, and set out for the city of the Arabian Nights, with little joy.

“Remember,” Yacoub said when the car was about to start on its long desert journey, “life is resilient. Give it another bounce.”

“Not through further treachery, I hope.” I said.

“Through further love, Jameel. Farewell! And send us some money when you can.”

In the afternoon I turned the fan on and slept. City Hotel was no great edifice. It was constantly rattled by the heavy buses that passed underneath. As there was a bus stop immediately below the balcony, the great red cars would creak as they came to a stop and, a few seconds later, snarl mightily as they started again. The floor shivered and the iron bedstead transmitted the shiver to my skin.

When I went out to the balcony at about five o’clock the heat had subsided—but what noise filled the street, what din, what riotous masquerade! A flood of cars honked and growled incessantly. Whenever there was a halt in the flow, the cacophony of horns was deafening. On either side of the street, on and off the sidewalks under the meandering colonnades, great crowds moved as though in a festival. Hawkers cried their wares, newspaper boys yelled, some shouted obscene oaths, others emitted laughs as loud as the motor car horns, and in the variegated uproar a voice reiterated: “Five thousand dinars! Five thousand dinars!” It was the cry of the barefoot lottery boys selling their tickets, offering their golden promise to all. “Tomorrow’s the draw! Five thousand dinars!”

The stupendous sight shocked me out of my lethargy. Women passed by, mostly in black abas. They walked through the commotion with the elegance of mannequins and the dignity of nuns. In the cars could be seen bare feminine elbows resting on their doors. No two men were dressed alike. The head-gear varied from a hat to a turban to a bedouin black coil, and the majority of the young men, in trousers and open-neck shirts, were bare-headed. Arab cloak and European suit moved side by side, and horse-cabs jogged along-side Buicks and Cadillacs. At least two different songs floated electrically over the din from different wireless sets at full blast. When I leaned over the balcony I found that on our side of the street, less than twenty yards up, there was an open-air café already crowded with men, where a voluble radio was determinedly active. The other radio was in a shop on the opposite side: shopkeepers were fond of music behind their counters.