



Abd al-karim Ghallab

WE HAVE
BURIED
THE PAST

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

‘ABD AL-KARIM GHALLAB was a Moroccan political journalist and novelist. He was the author of five novels and three collections of short stories. In 2004 he was awarded the Maghreb Culture Prize of Tunis. Ghallab’s novels have been translated into many languages.

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‘ABD AL-KARIM GHALLAB

Translated by Roger Allen



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Afterword

1

In the city of Fez, the Makhfiyya Quarter was the residence of the Tihami family. The family was middle class and well off, one of those that enjoyed its own share of wealth and prestige, coupled with a total adherence to traditional values and the maintenance of respect, all within the confines of the society in which it existed – one that did not transcend the boundaries of the quarter where the family resided. Whatever wealth the family members had, however, was both modest and deep-rooted; they remained unspoiled by luxury and felt content and secure within their own environment.

Families like this did not hold themselves above poorer neighbours and workers who lived in the same quarter, nor did they aspire to quit the quarter in which they themselves had prospered. They were friendly with their neighbours and fully accustomed to being treated by them with all due respect. They made full use of the quarter's facilities – the mosque, of course; the baths; the baking oven; and the merchants who sold foodstuffs. All these different elements tied them firmly to the quarter and made it a society of its own, duly esteemed, respected, and venerated by everyone who lived there.

In the Makhfiyya Quarter the Tihami family had inherited a house with a huge, wide front door, where sheer neglect and a lack of attention had allowed time and decay to form a pact of their own. The crumbling high walls of the house gave evidence of both the extreme care that had gone into its construction and the total neglect that it had suffered ever since it had last had any contact with either builders or decorators.

Anyone standing in front of these lofty walls would have few doubts that behind them was the kind of residence with which Fez was familiar in the days when it was a city for the rich, well off, and privileged – times when people were eager to build huge mansions more like palaces than ordinary dwellings. They too would have large rooms, courtyards, fountains, and other amenities. When owners built them, their idea would be for the houses to serve as major sources of inheritance for children, grandchildren, and near and distant relatives who were less well off.

You would not be far off the mark if, in coming into contact with the Tihami family, you concluded that the house in which they lived had been their residence for generations. At certain times in the family's history, the house had been as busy as a beehive, filled with family members – fathers, uncles, children, and grandchildren, all of them living in a single social network. It was as though, within the Makhfiyya Quarter, they constituted a state in their own right, all of them orbiting around different tables three times a day for meals in the rooms or in the courtyard: one table for men, another for women, and a third for servants. Later on, the women would all gather – wives, unmarried daughters, and servants – inside the huge kitchen, while the men and boys would all go out to their workplaces and shops. The young boys and girls would either cluster together, yelling and screaming as they played, or else, in the case of the boys, go to the jurist's Qur'an school where they would learn how to read and write and memorise some suras from the holy book, and, in the case of the girls, to the lady's house to learn how to sew.

The exterior of the house hardly provided an accurate picture of the inside. Age and decay had not managed to do much damage to the spacious halls and wide rooms that the hands of skilled craftsmen had carefully decorated with mosaics, paintings, and other types of ornamentation. When the original owner had the house built, he was not planning a work of art but rather something that would show the extent of his wealth and

luxurious lifestyle. In the house itself and its sheer size the women in the family – wives, daughters, and servants – all found a form of consolation from the highly restricted routine imposed on them by the life they had to live inside this extensive prison. The only time one of them might be prepared to leave the home was when she needed to go to the bathhouse or attend a wedding ceremony. For women and female servants, such opportunities arose only occasionally.

Eventually this mansion, with everything and everyone inside it, had come into the hands of Hajj Muhammad, doyen of the Tihami family. He was a portly man, with a pale complexion and curly beard. When it came to the hair on his head, the local barber gave no one the opportunity to find out whether it was white or black: he came to the house regularly every Friday morning to shave heads and trim the beards of those who had them. The only people who managed to escape his sharp razor were some of the family's playful children, who seized the opportunity of their grandparents and parents being shaved to take to their heels. That way they could avoid the rough hand that would otherwise clasp their young heads, douse them in soapy water using a decayed chunk of sponge, and then start on them with the razor, which by this time had lost its sharp edge.

Hajj Muhammad tended to his manner of dress with all the attention of an ambitious man. In summertime it would consist only of a single loose-fitting shirt, usually made of a fairly coarse fabric, although repeated washing had somewhat mitigated the roughness. His wife made a point of decorating it with a silken collar, from which a silk cord hung down to create a bow by which the two sides of the collar could be tied together on the left-hand side. This bow took the place of a button, and with it there was no need of a button in any case: the entire arrangement had no need of buttons nor of the civilisation that had introduced buttons into this society. Not only that, but Hajj Muhammad could make use of the dangling part to attach his heavy silver watch, with its cover that protected the glass from breaking. It also meant he did not need to wear a wrist-strap, as the younger folk did and which got in the way of them correctly performing the ritual ablution before prayer. Over this shirt he would normally wear a garment called the *mansuriyya*, which was really not much different in shape from the shirt itself, except that the fabric was less coarse, and the chest was decorated with a stripe of woven silk and silk ties of the kind made by Jewish women in the Mellah, which possessed a beauty of their own.

During winter, between the shirt and the *mansuriyya* Hajj Muhammad wore a woollen kaftan of similar dimensions, either red or pink in colour. It could also be blue or violet, so it could be shared whenever his wife needed to borrow it from her husband upon being unexpectedly invited to a reception of some kind.

Hajj Muhammad adorned his head with a turban that was tightly wrapped around a red fez. It was the very same barber who undertook the wrapping of this turban with tremendous skill and dexterity – it was something that

only the most proficient barbers could do properly, being genuine specialists on everything to do with the head, even if it involved only measures to protect heads from extreme cold and heat. In addition to all this, there would be one or two jallabas, depending on the seasonal weather, topped by a burnous that in wintertime would be dark black – as protection against the severe cold for which Fez, and the Makhfiyya Quarter in particular, is well known among Moroccan cities. In summertime, when the temperatures were extremely hot, the top layer would be gleaming white. But, whatever the case, the appearance would always preserve a sense of nobility and convey an august demeanour. When it came to footwear, things would differ according to the season. In summer they would be white and light and thinly cushioned; in winter, by contrast, they would be yellow, heavy, and coarse, since they needed to be able to wade through the mud that covered the streets of Fez and to sink into the mire like duck's legs stuck in a stagnant pond.

Hajj Muhammad would hardly ever leave his residence until all the requirements of his august appearance and his mode of walking had been fully met. He would still criticise younger men who carelessly decided in summertime to drape their jallabas over their shoulders and tilt their fezzes to the sides of their heads. He would frown whenever he spotted them walking and rushing around, shouting and conversing too loudly – in his view, not showing their families in the best light.

'God have mercy on Hajj al-Tahir,' he would say. 'If he were to set eyes on his grandson Hamid, that young man who tears along the street with his fez in his hand, he would not hesitate to strike him with his cane and make him change his behaviour.'

This was the kind of thing Hajj Muhammad would yell to himself every time he spotted a young man who disliked wearing a fez on his head or pulled up his jallaba, ignoring tradition in the hope of shielding himself from the heat or hoping for a snatch of breeze on his legs.

2

It would be early morning when Hajj Muhammad left his house. Neither bitter cold nor pouring rain would deter him. Ever since he was a boy, he had grown used to observing the quarter as it woke up from the peace and quiet of slumber. As he rolled over in bed and gradually emerged from sleep, life with all its gentle quietude would begin to seep back into his limbs. One of his greatest delights was to wander through the Makhfiyya Quarter like an heir inspecting the properties of the two royal palaces. He would be delighted every time he walked around the quarter and noticed a

new shop here or there, reopening in order to provide the quarter's inhabitants with their daily provisions. During the course of his inspection tour he would make a point of dropping in on the flour and sponge vendors so he could observe the boys at work, providing food for their families.

'All's well in the world, and there's a blessing for the early riser!'

That is precisely what Hajj Muhammad told himself whenever he relished the way the lowly quarter roused itself in the morning. Such early bustle meant that life was still flowing through the limbs of the quarter's inhabitants. That made him happy: life was still as vigorous and unruly as he had always known it.

The tour used to start in the morning when Hajj Muhammad left his 'mansion' after confirming that life had resumed its normal daily routine. There was movement all over the place, and the various shops – butchers', vegetable-sellers', grocers', and provision merchants' – were all full of fresh produce. At that point Hajj Muhammad would leave his house and, with his habitual calm demeanour and slow gait – these being traits that managed to earn him respect and provoke feelings of confidence and joy – would pass by all those vendors. He would extend a greeting to each one in turn, always accompanied by his traditional smiles, which gave expression to his essential kindness and probity. However often he bestowed such smiles, they never lost their genuine intent. The people in the quarter sensed that behind the smiles were feelings of respect and love that linked them to Hajj Muhammad. For that very reason they used to welcome him cheerfully and greet him with a smile too, lowering their heads out of respect and esteem.

When he went round the quarter, he would be fully dressed, with a burnous on top; he would never take it off in hot weather, nor would he wrap himself up in it for warmth when it was very cold. But, whatever the case, he could always manage to keep the basket hidden. Sometimes he would have to carry it himself, when he could not find one of his children to do it for him. His goal in using his children like this was to train them in the ways of the marketplace, to teach them how to tell good products from bad and haggle over prices. Most of the time, instead of one of his own children, he would use one of the many young maidservants who populated the various parts of the household.

Hajj Muhammad would leave the house at this time of day in order to purchase supplies for the family. He would be welcomed in every shop, not simply because he had been their customer for a very long time, but due to the great respect in which he was held in the quarter. Indeed, he could be said to be the Makhfiyya Quarter's mayor. For that reason he was always given genuine advice about purchases from the various vendors. He would be well treated, and the prices would be reasonable. Not only that, but more often than not the owner of the shop would advise him not to buy one product or another because the owner would know that the Hajj would not like it or would not feel comfortable about purchasing it. And he might well pause by the butcher's, but then quickly move on because he had not found

anything there that took his fancy, or else because the price of meat had gone up a piastre or two.

In spite of the respect he had towards these vendors, he would never hesitate to quibble over prices, even though the vendor might swear an oath to the effect that he would lose at the price being discussed. Hajj Muhammad would regularly haggle with the butcher or vegetable-seller, something that had its own jocular side. He would never believe what they were telling him and would make every effort to win the battle by using his pleasant smile and swearing an oath (that he made sure never invoked the name of God, so as to avoid falling into sin). This haggling ritual occurred every single day, without causing the slightest anxiety or annoyance to the merchants from his constant arguing and attempts to get a lower price on things. In fact, they came to expect it from him; they may even have seen it as a token of pride and honour. Such was Hajj Muhammad's status in the quarter that they did not find his haggling as annoying as they did that of other customers.

No sooner did he return to the house than his purchases were subject to precise criticism. This piece of meat, for example, was unacceptable because it was not as good as the other one. This vegetable could not be used with the rest of them because it was of very poor quality. He would often weigh the meat on a small pair of scales that he kept in the house; he was totally unwilling to accept any meat or vegetables that were underweight, whether by a little or a lot. He would never hesitate for a moment to argue with the vendor in question; he would regularly return produce to the place where he had bought it if he detected the slightest problem in either weight or quality.

But, in spite of this ongoing quest for satisfaction, which almost amounted to stinginess, Hajj Muhammad was much loved by the quarter's shopkeepers and much respected in all the various sectors that had contact with him. He was highly regarded by all the generations of people who shared the life of the Makhfiyya Quarter.

He had lived his life with many people in the quarter and had become their friend; not only that, but he also managed to maintain such ties across successive generations. He would occasionally bump into such people and give them his usual smile: greetings would be exchanged, and he would chat with them and listen to what they had to say. He never rejected out of hand the many ideas and dreams with which younger heads were filled. But, as he listened to the aspirations of the gullible younger folk who had yet to experience life to the full and were only acquainted with those aspects of it that seemed bright and attractive, his responses were often laced with a certain harmless sarcasm, or a mocking laugh.

He used to like stopping by the shops of the tailor or the flour-seller, conversing about events in the quarter, the day's main news, and activities in the commercial sector, with prices going up or down. He enjoyed probing things in detail so that he would not lose his connection to the outside world. These conversations would provide him with information that would

help him keep up with evening discussions and the comments of his friends. Most of these chats with shopkeepers would occur while they were waiting for prayer-time just before sunset, or else after the call to evening prayer.

As a result of all this, Hajj Muhammad became a personality within the quarter, one that its inhabitants and merchants could not do without. Everyone had a sense of his qualities as a kind of father or shepherd and his overall courtesy. Whenever he was absent – due to illness or travel – they would all miss him; and if he ever changed his routine when it came to touring the quarter in the morning or waiting in the evening for the call to prayer, they would all ask after him.

The thing that further enhanced the affection that the quarter's inhabitants and merchants felt for this beloved personality was his devoutness and close attention to preachers and spiritual guides. He would often attend homiletic gatherings and sessions of religious instruction which the shaykhs in the Qarawiyin Mosque or the Mawlay Idris shrine would regularly offer; there he would listen carefully to the commentaries on Muslim traditions and the biography of the Prophet. He heard so much of the Prophet's sayings (prayers and blessings be upon him!) and accounts of his life that he knew them by heart. His speech was always a melange of quotations from traditions and wisdom literature which he would regularly cite, even though not entirely accurately. Although he regularly listened to a good deal of sermonising and instruction, he was still unable to train his tongue or polish his language. Even so, he was quite prepared to make mistakes or explain what he had understood in his own colloquial dialect. In spite of everything he still felt that he was the quarter's legal expert and religious guide.

The lessons that he attended had a profound effect on him. They combined with his age and august temperament to make him a devout and conservative person, always concerned in case a slip of the tongue would cause offence or aggravate someone; or that his eye would trick him, and he would see part of a woman that the veil could not keep concealed – her eyes or hands, for instance; or that his heart or mind would let him down, and he would fail to offer counsel to people whom he believed he had the right to advise. He regarded it as an obligation to advise all the quarter's inhabitants, in accordance with the expectations of honour and religion.

3

Running the household alongside Hajj Muhammad's wife were five official maidservants. That number did not include the unofficial ones who were not allowed to be called 'maidservants'. The official ones were vestiges of the

era of slavery. The eldest among them had come as part of the dowry of Sayyida Khaduj, the Hajj's wife. At the time of her arrival she was still a young girl, tall, well built, and with strong muscles. She lived with the family as an obedient servant, working in the kitchen and doing other household chores. She took care of the children, tending to their needs, raising them, and relieving their mother of such responsibilities. This continuous hard labour and a life of absolute deprivation had had their effect on this elderly spinster and her psychological make-up. Her posture had sagged, and she rarely did much by way of exercise. By now she much preferred a life of ease and some peace and quiet – whenever, that is, circumstances permitted.

The other female servants were younger than her and had more energy and drive. Each one of them had been acquired on some particular occasion. They were all Moroccan and had been brought from the far south when they were still young. They differed from one another in age and colouring, and they also varied in their degree of beauty. One of them had a dark brown complexion that was almost black, while another had white skin. The others had wheat-coloured complexions, that is, before the passage of time turned them a dull yellow.

Within the household of Hajj Muhammad these servant-women constituted a separate society of their own. They were a central part of family life and knew its secrets. As a result they could discuss the history of all its members, men, women, and children; they were especially adept when it came to talking about personal histories and the important events in the life of each member of the family. Even so, they operated on the fringes of the family and did not possess the same status and social position as the family's womenfolk. Nothing could ever happen without these servant-women, and yet they would never be consulted about any matter concerning the family or about significant events in family life.

When they had some leisure time, they used to gather in a private room; because they had occupied it for so long, it had been dubbed 'the servants' room'. When they were not working, they would spend time chatting; sometimes there would be non-stop laughter as well, to accompany whispered comments. But that would only happen once they had made sure that the master was not at home and the mistress was not on edge but feeling quite relaxed. Their conversation usually revolved around the day's events in the kitchen and the house in general – and sometimes the street as well, if it so happened that one of them was given a special task to go outside and contact one of the family's female relatives. Street chatter was always a matter of shared gossip. Any number of men had no qualms about importuning female servants and shamelessly flirting with dark-skinned women within earshot of passers-by without finding the slightest degree of inappropriateness in their behaviour. Family traditions and the proper upbringing that these women had received may well have led them to show the necessary modesty and dignity as they went on their way. Even so, flirtatious expressions directed at them were bound to leave an echo in their

ears that could only be expunged through an exchange of gossip and suppressed giggles that would emerge from the servants' room every so often when there was time to relax.

Memories were a frequent topic of the ongoing series of evening conversations among these servant-women. For each one of them, such memories sometimes acquired a patina of adventure, helped along perhaps by some basic but essentially human spirit of imagination. And they all enjoyed listening to the tales of kidnapping – that being the link that connected the two principal phases in their lives, the first of freedom, the second of slavery.

Many of these women, black and white alike, had only the vaguest memory of their original capture, leaving no trace in their lives of a period when they were free, had a family, and enjoyed a mother's love, a father's kindness, or a brother's affection. The only family they could recall was this new one in whose shadow they now lived, or the several families that had made use of them. They never remembered their original names, which their new ones had erased all trace of, even in the recesses of their minds.

But there was one of them who remembered it all, including her kidnapping. She could recall every detail of the event, even though she was young at the time. She could recall every feature of the person who had stolen her liberty; time had not managed to let her forget the first strange face she had ever seen in the small village where she grew up.

She had been a child of ten, living with her family in a small village in the south. She could still remember everything about life there, except for her own name – which had been Aisha. She used to go out with her brother and mother in search of water and firewood. Sometimes her mother would let her go with the shepherd or shepherdess to see where the best grazing places were, or to get her out of the house during household chores and to run off some energy, but only during the wonderful springtime when she was not worried about strong winds, extreme heat, or pouring rain. The sunshine would offer glimpses of the natural splendours to be found in the distant wilderness, far removed from the shade of houses, animal pens, tent tops, and bird nests.

One bright day the girl went out with the little lamb she used to play with; sometimes she would carry it, sometimes she would pull it along gently. She was looking for fresh green pasturage, running through the wide-open spaces, singing shepherdess's songs, and competing with them to tend the sheep, boasting that she was the owner of all the little lambs. Later in the morning she felt thirsty, so she headed for the stream to have a drink. There she went and never came back.

She could still recall that day long ago as though it were only yesterday; she could remember every single detail. She had described it so many times and its echoes bounced around her memory so much that it was firmly rooted in her consciousness.

Tripping lightly, she hurried to the stream, anxious to drink some cold water that would quench her thirst. When she reached the deserted stream, no peasants were to be seen and no shepherds were close by; the only sound in this refreshing scene was the twittering of birds. She felt completely safe, relishing the loneliness of the spot and actually enjoying the feeling of being on her own.

Jawhara – that being the name she was later called by when she became part of the distinguished household of Hajj Muhammad – approached the stream, delighted by both the purity and the coldness of the water that she bent down and scooped up in her small hands to quench her thirst and cool her face, which had been scorched by the sun and was turning red. On the surface of the clear, burbling water she noticed the figure of a horseman who had come so close to the spring that the horse's hooves were almost in the water. When she lifted her head, it was to see a strongly built man with a fine physique, bursting with youthful vigour. His face was red, his hair blonde, and his eyes blue; he was wearing a white turban, part of which hung down like a veil. Over his jallaba he was wearing a burnous, the two sides of which resembled the wings of a gigantic falcon. He was confidently holding the reins of a splendid horse with strong muscles, a wonderful gait, and delicate legs; it was nervous and was difficult to keep still – as though it were continuously ready to take off and jump.

Jawhara stared at the horseman in panic, but she soon felt calmer when he smiled at her. She smiled back, as though she had known him for some time.

She bent down over the stream again, feeling at ease, but she soon took notice when he asked her a question.

'What are you doing at this stream, little girl?'

'Having a drink, sir.'

'Is it cold, clean, and nice?'

'Very cold. Would you like a drink?'

'Yes, I would. But tell me, where are you from? Aren't you scared to be on your own in this deserted spot?'

'I'm not scared of anyone. I'm close to the pasture, and my small flock is waiting for me. I'll be going back to them in just a minute.'

'Wouldn't you rather come with me to my city far away? It's nice and a lot of fun.'

'No. My mother and father will be waiting for me when I bring the flock back in the evening. I don't like being away from the flock for too long.'

'Fill this jug of mine with some of your cold water. I'm thirsty!'

She took the jug from him, filled it up, and handed it back. No sooner had she done so than two powerful hands grabbed her, lifted her up, and put her at the front of the saddle. She hardly had time to realise what was happening before the horse was taking off with its rider and his captive, barely noticing the hills and valleys, high and low. One of the two falcon wings had enfolded her, and only her tiny face was exposed to any light. She

found herself swaying in his arms, her body wedged between two powerful arms from which there was no possibility of escape. She tried calling for help, but her cries were lost in the infinite expanse. Looking behind her, she tried pleading with him, but found that his handsome face was buried in his head-covering; all she could see were his two blue eyes, rigid and determined. Outright panic robbed her of all strength, and she began to weep silently. Behind those tears the world was dancing, as were her own emotions, suppressed and paralysed with fear.

All she could remember about what happened next was that the horseman took good care of her. Her young mind was incapable of dealing with the horror of the disaster that this dreadful kidnapping had caused her. The man was kind and polite and tried his best to make her forget the bitter sorrow that she was bound to feel at being snatched away from her parents and flocks of lambs. He tried to remove her worries, particularly about her father, who would be furious at her for running away or simply disappearing – he had always insisted that she not be left alone with any man, whatever his status might be. This was what she came to realise for herself once she was in the house of Ibn Kiran, the slave trader, as she listened to her fellow victims talking about unmarried girls and widows and the price they would fetch in the slave market.

The horseman stayed with her for a while in a distant city, one that she heard was named Marrakesh. All she knew of it was a modest house in a shady part of the city that she entered and left at night. After that she was moved to Fez, the city where she was to spend the rest of her days. Once she had spent a few days in Ibn Kiran's house, she was moved to the house of her new master, Hajj Muhammad al-Tihami.

The horseman, whose smiling face she could still remember reflecting in the gently moving stream, had disappeared ever since he handed her over to Ibn Kiran. He had wished the trader well and urged him to take good care of her and demand a good price.

4

Jawhara could still recall that Ibn Kiran's house was modest and dark; it had a wooden door like that of an old bathhouse or a deserted garden in a village far removed from the city quarters. Its wooden lock only worked from the inside. The old door had a hole in it through which you inserted your hand to open the lock. Beyond the door was a long, dark corridor ending in a small, dimly lit hallway. In a corner directly opposite the doorway was a wooden bench with some old, threadbare pelts on it, upon which sat a human pile of flesh and fat, wrapped in a variety of jallabas that

might be white or black, only distinguishable by a flushed face enveloped in old rags whose only purpose was to keep the bloated red face warm. This was Ibn Kiran, the slave dealer.

Over sixty years old, he was a short, podgy man with a white beard and a loud voice that could instil fear into the ears of his listeners whenever he chose to raise it. The unfortunate people who had fallen into his clutches could be made even more frightened when he became angry: his blood would start churning, his nostrils would flare, his eyes would bulge, and his face would turn scarlet. Then he would froth at the mouth, and spittle would fly from his wrinkled, toothless gums.

He may have been quick to anger, irritable, and given to much shouting, but he would soon calm down: his features would relax, and he would start smiling. This would particularly be the case when he spotted a new customer, or one of his many guests. The general view was that a ready temper was one of the requisites for a slave dealer; his aim was to teach the slave how to obey, accept orders, and show an awareness of their humiliation. His method involved raising his voice and yelling threats whenever one of the arrivals in the house of Ibn Kiran was about to do something that was not to the great slave dealer's liking.