

THE RETURN OF SIDI EMMHAMMED

BY RAOUL STOUPAN

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SIDI EMMHAMMED BEN LACHMI pulled the hood of his burnous down over his eyes as he entered his home. He felt weary, so weary that he wished for, death — good, friendly death, down under the crazy weeds of the cemetery. Squatting in the shadow of his bare room, he lighted a cigarette. His khaki blouse, spangled with the ribbons of his decorations, hung from a nail and the three *galons* of a captain in the French army glistened on the sleeves, bringing back all the memories of the military career that he had abandoned, his flight from his father's house, his enlistment, the constant study of the years of his apprenticeship, the joy of rising in rank, year by year, his pride when he became an officer, his marriage to a daughter of France, the terrible war with the quick promotion that it brought, his citations, his medals —

He had come back to the town of his fathers, after he had been given his discharge — the little town that he had quitted one clear morning in flowery May, so long ago. It had seemed lovelier than ever to him on his return, — his birth-place, Blida, — welcoming him home again, and he had murmured again to himself the words of the old *marabout* (seer): 'You are called a little town, but for my part, I call you a little rose.'

He was glad that he was all alone as he received the first smile of the village. He had urged his wife to stay at Algiers for a little while. He knew that his father was reconciled to him, but he wanted to make sure of his good-will

before bringing home the daughter of a *roumi*. He must prepare things; he must not hurry matters; there was need of tact. No one awaited him at the railway station, — not even old Lakdar who had cared for him when he was only a little fellow, — but, no whit disturbed, he made his way to the Arab quarter of the town, his soul throbbing with his memories.

As he approached the house, apprehension overtook him. How would his father receive him? Sidi Emmhammed's heart, hardened by long service in camp and under hurricanes of fire on the battlefield, failed him, like the heart of a child who knows he has done wrong, so that he almost trembled as he knocked at the discolored door.

It was Lakdar, a broken old man now, who received him with the quiet glance of a good old dog. In the rear of the court, on a frayed old rug, Sidi Lachmi was smoking his *kif*. Sidi Lachmi did not open his arms for the patriarchal embrace, as is the custom of the Arabs. After a quick touch of their hands, he kissed his forefinger negligently and then sat immovable. Only the keen eyes in his brown scarred face were alive, and they pierced down to the very bottom of his son's heart. The captain, humble under his uniform with its stars and crosses, lowered his eyes.

'My father,' he said, finding it difficult even to speak, 'may Allah be blessed for having kept thee in health!'

The old man bowed his head without reply; and then, with a longer glance, he

murmured slowly, 'Since Allah has brought thee again to the house of thy fathers, let it be thy first duty to don again the dress that they have worn.'

Emmhammed went to his room without protest. He had never contemplated putting on coat and vest and trousers, when at last he should doff his uniform; for European clothing seemed to him at once disgusting and without grace. But this reception destroyed the joy of his home-coming. He ended the day shut up alone in his room, on the divan.

It was not until the next day that his father, a little more ready for speech, called him 'my son,' for the first time.

'My son, since thy departure, not once have I gone forth from this house, that I might escape the glances of these black sons of darkness who have come to be our masters, and to whom thou hast delivered over the days of thy youth. If thou hast wounded my sight with that clothing which recalls all this to me, let it be for the last time.'

'It shall be even as thou dost wish, my father,' replied Sidi Emmhammed. He dared not speak of his wife.

He set out from his home at random and rambled sadly through the streets of Blida. Friends of his childhood crossed his path, and either did not know him, or pretended that they did not. He pulled his cloak about his eyes and went back again to his home.

That is why Sidi Emmhammed, captain of the First Tirailleurs, was smoking cigarettes in a chamber of his father's house and wishing for death. Did he regret his military life, the life of the quasi-European, which had taken the finest years of his youth; or was he glad that he had lived so? What would have been better? He could not think of anything. But it seemed to him that it would be good to end his days beside that jet of water falling monotonously in the fountain in the

court, with his wife beside him, the wife whom he had chosen and whom he still loved, in spite of the first threads of silver about her temples. This Frenchwoman was growing old less rapidly than Moorish women; she was still desirable; there was a charm about her which he had never found in the little prostitutes of his own race, the only women of his own country whom he had ever had a chance to know. The upshot of it all was that he loved her and that she sufficed for him.

But what of his father? Would he endure her presence in his house? Suppose his father refused — what then? Go back with her? Live like a European, amid the noise and bustle of a great city? It was an odious idea to him. Weary of movement and action, he longed for repose, for the enveloping peace and calm of Islam. To make the same gestures over and over, between the morning prayer and the evening prayer, in the quietness of Blida, where it was always spring; to sink to sleep in warm and perfumed arms; to grow old insensibly amid the insensible flight of things — there was the happiness that he craved, until death. For a moment he hated the father, who kept him from fulfilling his happiness as he longed to have it; then atavistically, the resignation of his race swept him away.

The shadows of the night were stealing into his chamber when Lakdar came with a message: 'My master sends word that his son will visit Sidi El Hadj Belkassem.'

Emmhammed was not annoyed. He saw in the incident only a welcome diversion. With his learning and his gracious manners, with his talk his quotations from the Koran and from the poets, the aged holy man had a charming unction of his own. Emmhammed found him little changed in spite of his great age, though he had, perhaps, grown more circumspect.

El Hadj begged him to partake of his evening meal, *kousskouss*, moistened with whey; and as they slowly ate, he asked question after question. Did not the officer regret the profession of arms? Was he glad to return to his own land? Why, then, had he married a Frenchwoman? Were there no pretty women to be found among the Arabs? He would not let her go unveiled in the streets?

Emmhammed made evasive replies to these insidious questions but the old *marabout* sought to pierce his very soul, taking upon himself the rôle of moral adviser to one whom he considered as a son. The old man was not to be put off with half-answers. He had an impressive way of saying, with a smile, 'Allah looks into the bottom of your soul even as I into your eyes.'

Little by little Emmhammed un-bosomed himself further. Was it by design that the past was mentioned? Had the years that had gone by helped without his knowing it, in this distortion. He admitted that he had suffered among the *roumis*. All in all, he felt himself to be different from them; and then their attitude, their kindness, — which sometimes masked their hatred, — their insinuations, the very thoughts which he sometimes suspected in them, often wounded him to the quick. He talked at great length of his superiors or of his 'comrades' — a phrase of devotion which he repeated with a shade of bitterness — in order to keep from talking of his wife.

'There is no good in association with the infidels,' concluded the old *marabout*. 'One of our sages rightly says, "The Arabs are at an equal distance from extremes, at the centre of the physical world and at the centre of the moral world." They are in the best position, then, for the best of everything is its golden mean.'

'Yes,' said Emmhammed, replying

to the old man like his echo, 'pride fills my heart when I read on the gate of Djemaâ-Djedid d'El Djezaïr those glorious verses of a poet (to whom may Allah accord his mercy): "Since Allah has called Him who called us to obedience, the most noble of prophets, it is we who are the noblest among all peoples."'

The meal was over. In its earthen bowl the red *felfel* gleamed.

'My son,' said El Hadj, 'let us go to the café of Mouloud. There we shall find the true believers of Blida, and hear the best tales that the story-tellers know. Thou shalt see once more the friends of thy childhood. They will rejoice to know that thou hast not forgotten us, but hast returned to the ways of Allah.'

The two men went out together. A crescent gleamed in the sky from the dome of a high mosque. They smiled up proudly at it. The café of Mouloud was swarming. In the light of the lanterns some Arabs were playing dominoes, others were playing cards, while still others were silently sipping their coffee. In front of the *oudjak* Mouloud, with his thin, angular face and scanty hair under his turban, was busy. Smoke filled the room.

Introduced by the *marabout*, Emmhammed received a welcome which was warm, though a little pitying. Friends of other times, who that very day had seemed to have forgotten him, now embraced him warmly. About the smoking, sweet-scented cups, they chatted quietly; but El Hadj, seeing in the rear of the room a little old man with whitish eyes, happily sipping his *kaoua*, called out to him in an imperative tone:

'Abdallah! Come tell us the tale of the hundred and one sittings. I bring a hearer who has never heard thy tales.'

His face lighted by a smile, the blind man rose, and, with lagging step, felt his uncertain way among the squatting

coffee-sippers. He found a place in the circle that had formed about the *marabout*, drank, in slow small sips, another cup of syrupy coffee, paused a moment for reflection, cast up his sightless eyes toward the smoky ceiling, and in a measured, sing-song voice with a slight swaying of his body, he began his story:—

‘In very ancient times, this happened. All the saints of Moghreb gathered themselves together to decide to what authority the true believers of the land should submit themselves. Long and bitter was their debate, and it lasted for a hundred and one sittings. Turn and turn about, very many of the holy ones spoke, one after another, some for the Turks, some for the Franks. The warmest advocate of the Franks, the aged El Marsli, declared that they were good people, wise, tolerant. “They will bring us order and security,” said he. “The fields shall be worked and again grow fertile; our cities shall be secure and safe. Roads properly built will bring to El Djezaïr the dates of the desert. The oases will spring up afresh about new wells. Amazing machines that spit out smoke will carry the sons of the prophet more speedily than the swiftest *meharas*. The poor and sick will be healed and cared for. And you will see that the *roumis* of France will protect the sanctuaries of Allah and will respect the tombs of the saints.”’

Sidi Emmhammed, wrapped in warmth and languor, thought, ‘Yes, the French have done all those things, and my wife and I, Sidi Emmhammed Ben Lachmi, belong to their race.’

The old story-teller recounted the intervention of Etsa-Albi, the patron of El-Djezaïr, who sought to put the assembly of the holy ones on its guard against these suspicious benefits. ‘For he said, “The French are no less than Manichæans, adorers of idols, an ac-

cursed race. Their faces will blacken till the day of judgment. They have but one aim: to make Allah’s adorers like themselves. They come with words like honey. They set up schools to turn aside the children from the holy religion. They take for their army the best of the young men of Moghreb, that they may complete their corruption. They seek to destroy the home of the Mussulman. They set up the scandal of their women, with faces uncovered and forever at the sides of the men. By the most devious ways they alienate the true believers from the Faith and the Law. In every public square, like poisonous spiders, they seek to snare the poor Mohammedan fly in their webs.”’

Sidi Emmhammed murmured sadly to himself that he had been such a fly, caught in the snare of the infidel. But he would break away, he would flee back to the sunlight, the fair sun, Mohammed. The syrupy coffee, the smoke of the tobacco, the melodious drone of the story-teller, all this twined about his heart like a penetrating intoxication.

The story ended. The group, squatting as they talked, said that the Cross, for a little time, might supplant the Crescent. But what is a hundred years in the eyes of Allah?

‘They may crush us again and again,’ said the story-teller, ‘but never shall they destroy us. No, on the other hand, many of them shall be won to the Law of the Prophet, as true believers. As for the true believers, submitting to the will of the All-Powerful, they may wait with confidence in the Master of the Hour.’

‘This will come about,’ thought Emmhammed; ‘and if my eyes are not then closed in death, on that day I shall give all the strength that is left in me to Allah’s service. *Akarbi*, I swear it!’

All night long Emmhammed was in

prayer. The next day a letter came from his wife, who asked whether he had fixed the day when he would see her once again. Because he thought the time for asking his father's consent to bring her had not yet come, he did not let himself dream of it. To win the indulgence of Allah and true inspiration, he fasted for three days, and every evening he went to visit the *marabout*. It was on the third day that the aged El Hadj came to see Sidi Lachmi and had a long conversation with him. Emmhammed went to pray at the tomb of Sidi Yacoub, and he met the holy man in the street, returning to his house. Emmhammed, greeting him respectfully, went in. His father, standing in the courtyard, embraced him for the first time.

'Rejoice, my son,' he said, 'to find the truth once more.'

That night the prodigal broke his fast. When he awoke next morning, only the chirping of the birds broke the peaceful silence of the dwelling. He rose and prayed, turning toward the east. Then he took up at random a Koran which lay on a little table, and unrolled the scroll. His eyes fell upon this *sura*: 'O prophet, bid thy wives, thy daughters, and the wives of the believers, to draw their veils low. Thus shall they be neither despised nor slandered. God is indulgent and merciful.' Then at last Emmhammed ben Lachmi thought the hour had come. He went to seek his father, and with humility begged permission to bring home his wife. The old man made a gesture of impatience.

'What does a woman matter?' he said. 'If she will live like the wives of the believers, let her come.'

The officer waited for no more favorable response. He went back to his chamber and slowly wrote a letter, in the language of the *roumis*, but mingled with the images of the Orient, involved formulas, and protestations of his love. He prayed his wife to submit to the Mussulman Law, to live the enclosed life of the Mohammedan woman, to go abroad rarely, and only with the veil. He would rejoice to take her again to himself, and he would never have another wife. If she would not consent, though it would grieve him, he would never see her again, and since, for one who has not reached old age, it is hard to live without a wife, he would marry the daughter of a believer, according to the usages of his race. His conscience and the respect that he owed his father enjoined this conduct on him. It was all that he could do. But he hoped that she, 'the chosen of his heart,' would yield to his noble desires; he hoped ardently for it, for no woman in the world could give him so supreme a joy as she.

Emmhammed read his letter attentively. Then he folded it, sealed it, wrote the address hastily, and went himself to post it, after which, he went back to his chamber, repeated the *sura* of the Koran word for word, and prayed. Then Emmhammed ben Lachmi, late an officer of the First Tirailleurs, awaited with watching and fasting, the will of Allah.

HOW THE PEACE CONFERENCE DEALT WITH SILESIA

BY MERMEIX

[This author, whose book upon the Peace Conference is remarkably well documented, and who appears to have access to reliable inside sources of information, has just made public that portion of the discussion at several sessions of the 'Council of Three' which related to Upper Silesia. The text is taken from the memoranda made by the interpreters who were present.]

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LLOYD GEORGE proposed that a plebiscite be taken, concluding his argument in its favor with these words: 'I am convinced that the popular vote will be favorable to Poland.'

Clemenceau. — So far as Poland is concerned, there is, first of all, an historical crime to be atoned; but there is also the need of creating a barrier between Germany and Russia. You can read the interview just given by Mr. Erzberger. He demands that Poland be as feeble as possible, since it separates Germany from Russia. He adds that, when Germany and Russia come to terms, Germany can attack France with better promise of success than in 1914. Is that what you want? Germany, mistress of Russia, means that our dead have died for nothing. That is all I want to say on the subject just now.

Wilson. — A plebiscite in Upper Silesia seems to me a difficult undertaking. It will be necessary first to expel the German officials.

Lloyd George. — Do you mean the petty officials?

Wilson. — No, I mean those who have charge of the general administration.

Clemenceau. — Don't forget, however, that the central government appoints the mayors in Germany.

Lloyd George. — I agree that the prin-

cipal German officials should leave the country before the vote is taken.

Wilson. — Yes, but more than that. Fifteen or twenty great German capitalists own Upper Silesia.

Clemenceau. — That's true, too — particularly Henckel, of Donnersmark.

Wilson. — A free and uninfluenced plebiscite would be an impossibility, according to my advisers, in a country which has been so long under an alien government, and which would be in constant fear of reprisals unless the Germans were evicted.

Lloyd George. — However, in spite of that fear, the Poles won the elections of 1907. My advisers, and I personally, believe a plebiscite would be favorable for Poland. They think that such a plebiscite would prevent the Germans from laying claim to the country later.

Wilson. — There is no strong public sentiment in Germany in favor of retaining Upper Silesia. It is entirely an affair of the big capitalists.

Lloyd George. — However, the German government is controlled by the Socialists, and they are the ones who protest.

Wilson. — Yes, but at the instance of the capitalists. I repeat, an uninfluenced vote is impossible.

Lloyd George. — Very well. We can occupy the territory during the election.