

Khaled

At first it blew like a waft of wind, a light breeze, but suddenly it strengthened, whipping up sand violently. So odd and abrupt, it had even caught Khaled unawares. And yet, he had seen so many sandstorms – he, an old Berber, who had often crossed the desert. In his long life he had come to learn how to distinguish them, listen to them, smell their faraway scents, brace himself for the worst yet to come, but he had never experienced them before in such a treacherous, unusual way.

A strange anxiety froze his thoughts, as if foreshadowing the idea of the end. Hastily, he ordered the camels to crouch and the very moment he was sitting down, he stopped and sprang round, scanning the sand nervously. The air had grown heavier and a thick cloud of dust tightly took hold of him. Terror crossed his eyes, tired, incessantly wounded in the wind. He could not possibly desert the boy. Hamid's mother had entrusted the little boy to him in order to take him to *Timbuktu* where he would join his brother. He was now the only one who could actually help him. «Hamiid» he shouted at the top of his voice, muffled by the wind. «Hamiid» he went on, painfully aware that the boy could not possibly hear him.

The howling of the sky deepened, starting to sweep the dunes, and making it impossible to breathe. Khaled should have taken

shelter among the camels, hoping for *Allah's* mercy, but he could not seem to yield to the idea of losing the boy.

«I'm his protector» he kept telling himself as the sand clogged his throat.

He struggled in vain to keep it off, yet the eddy kept spinning around him, turning dunes into dark, overwhelming billows. Impalpable rivulets of dust began flooding his lips, strenuously defended by a thin strip of *shesh*¹, and a spasm of impure breath overflowed the edges of his lungs. A whooping cough echoed through his bronchial tubes, smacking them into violent colics, while his thoughts yearned to get a breath of fresh air. For some long, endless moments, he skilfully managed to control his breath and, later, with his lungs once again filled with air, he opened his mouth, starting to shout bravely.

«Hamiid.»

Unexpected as it was, that scream seemed to attract the vortex that, irritated, began lashing at him with rage. His clothes blew up furiously and minute blades of sand hurled themselves fiercely against his body. His eyes narrowed into slits thickened with a dense curtain which blinded him completely. Determined to push on, Khaled advanced into the night, brandishing his arms at knee-level.

«Hamiid» he muttered, exhausted, giving in to a furious slap of wind. The devil's blow went on raging, raising a dune which rolled over his body, burying him into silence.

The moaning of an animal, the wounded head of which surprisingly surfaced the sand, attracted the caravan. It was by pure chance that those nomads were nearby when the whirl abated. Intrigued by its calls, they freed it only to miraculously discover that it was the old man. The boy, who had been hunkering beside

¹ Traditional turban of Sahara nomads.

the camel all the time, lay on his back, right under the man's body. One upon the other, shielding each other, they had created a breathing space, which the sandstorm had not violated.

With a trickle of water running down his face, Khaled looked at the boy, and smiled, as a tear of joy stroked the eye left unscathed by the hell. They were once again together, cradled by the benign hand of *Allah*.