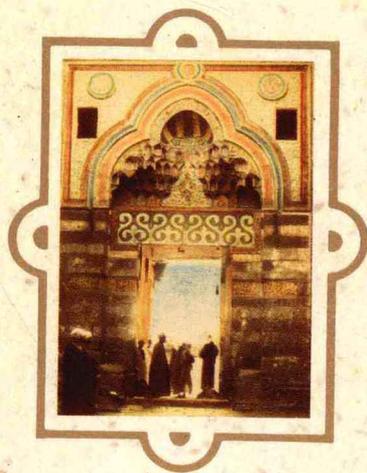


the
harafish



فكر الحرفيس

"A whirling dervish of a good yarn." — Michael Dorris, *Los Angeles Times*

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M A H F O U Z

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

NAGUIB MAHFOUZ

Translated by Catherine Cobham

*The
Harafish
&*

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The historical meaning of *harafish* is the rabble or riffraff. In the novel it means the common people in a positive sense, those in menial jobs, casual workers, and the unemployed and homeless.

I am grateful to Sabry Hafez for help and encouragement, and to Mohamed Malek for the transliterations of the lines of Persian poetry.

CATHERINE COBHAM

St. Andrews

October 1992

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Ashur al-Nagi



*The first tale in the epic
of the harafish*

1.

In the passionate dark of dawn, on the path between death and life, within view of the watchful stars and within earshot of the beautiful, obscure anthems, a voice told of the trials and joys promised to our alley.

2.

He felt his way along with his rough stick, his guide in his eternal darkness. He knew where he was by the smell, by the number of steps he had taken, by how well he could hear the chanting, and by his own inspired instincts. Between his house by the graveyard and the alley was the hardest but also the most delightful part of his route to the Husayn mosque. Unexpectedly there came to his sharp ears the cries of a newborn child. It could have been an echo, magnified in the silence of the dawn. It roused him unceremoniously from the intoxicated visions inspired in him by the sacred chanting. At this hour, mothers are supposed to be totally preoccupied with their children! The noise was growing louder and nearer and he would soon be level with it. He cleared his throat to fore-

stall a collision in the quiet landscape of dawn, wondering when the child would stop crying so that he could revert to his state of calm repose. Now the crying came insistently on his left-hand side. He moved over to the right until his shoulder brushed the wall of the dervish monastery. He stopped and called out, "Woman! Feed the child!"

But nobody answered him. The crying continued. "Woman! Hello! Is anybody there?" he shouted.

All he could hear was the sound of crying. He was filled with misgivings. Gone was the innocence of the dawn. Very cautiously he advanced in the direction of the sound, keeping his stick close in to his side. He bent forward a little, extending his hand gently until his forefinger touched a bundle of clothing. It was just what he'd expected. He moved his fingers around in its folds until he felt a soft moist face, convulsed with tears.

"The wickedness of human hearts!" he exclaimed under his breath. Then he raised his voice in anger. "May they rot in hell!"

He thought a little but decided not to ignore the bundle even if it meant missing the dawn prayer at the Husayn mosque. The breeze was chilly at this time on a summer's morning, there were a lot of lizards and suchlike about, and God tested his servants in unforeseen ways. He picked the bundle up gently, then resolved to return home to consult his wife. He heard the sound of voices. It was probably worshipers on their way to the dawn prayer. He gave another cough to warn of his presence.

"God's peace on the faithful," came a voice from the darkness.

"And on you," he answered quietly.

The speaker recognized his voice and said, "Sheikh Afra Zaydan? What's holding you up?"

"I'm going back home. It's nothing serious."

"I hope not, Sheikh Afra!"

He hesitated, then said, "I found a newborn child at the foot of the old wall."

There was the sound of muttering between the men.

"May they rot in hell, the criminals!"

"Take it to the police station!"

"What are you going to do with it?"

“God will guide me,” said Afra with a calm inappropriate to the situation.

3.

Sakina held the lamp up in her left hand. She was alarmed when she saw it was her husband. “Why have you come back?” she demanded. “I hope nothing’s wrong?” Then she saw the baby. “Whatever’s that?”

“I found it on the path.”

“Merciful God!”

She took the child gently and the sheikh sat on the sofa between the well and the oven, mumbling, “There is no God but God.”

Sakina began rocking the child in her arms. “It’s a boy, Sheikh Afra!” she said tenderly.

He nodded silently.

“He must need food,” she went on anxiously.

“What do you know about it? You’ve never had children.”

“I know some things, and I can always ask. What are you going to do with him?”

“They told me I should take him to the police station.”

“Do you think they’ll feed him there? Let’s wait until someone comes looking for him.”

“Nobody will.”

A tense silence followed. “Isn’t it wrong to keep him any longer than we have to?” muttered the sheikh at length.

“The wrong’s already been done,” said his wife with passionate energy.

Then inspiration came to her; she welcomed it delightedly. “I can’t hope to have a child of my own now.”

He pushed his turban back to reveal a protruding forehead like the handle of a washbowl. “What are you thinking, Sakina?” he demanded.

“How can I refuse what God has provided?” she said, intoxicated by her idea.

He wiped his closed eyes with his handkerchief and said nothing.

"It's what you want yourself!" she cried triumphantly.

"I've missed the dawn prayer in al-Husayn," he complained, ignoring her.

She smiled broadly and without taking her eyes off the swollen little face said, "Dawn's only just breaking, and God is forgiving and merciful."

The sheikh got up to pray as Darwish Zaydan came downstairs, his eyelids heavy with sleep, saying, "I'm hungry, sister-in-law."

He noticed the baby and looked astonished, as a boy of ten might. "What's that?" he asked.

"A gift from God," answered Sakina.

He stared hard at it. "What's its name?"

After a moment's hesitation, the woman said almost inaudibly, "Let him take my father's name, Ashur Abdullah, and may God bless him."

In the background Sheikh Afra recited the dawn prayer.

4.

The days went by to the sound of the beautiful, obscure anthems. One evening Sheikh Afra Zaydan said to his brother Darwish, "You're twenty years old. When are you going to get married?"

"All in good time," answered the youth nonchalantly.

"You're a fine strong porter. They make a good living!"

"All in good time."

"Aren't you frightened of being led astray?"

"God protects the faithful."

The blind Quran reciter shook his head. "You got nothing from Quran school," he said regretfully, "and you don't know a single chapter of God's book by heart."

"Work is what counts, and I earn my living by the sweat of my brow," said Darwish irritably.

The sheikh pondered for a few moments. Then he asked, "Those scars on your face, how did you get them?"

Darwish realized that his sister-in-law must have betrayed him and scowled at her. She was trying to light the oven, helped by Ashur.

"Darwish, do you really expect me to keep it a secret from your brother if you're being harmed?" she smiled.

"So you're modeling yourself on the men of evil and violence?" said the sheikh reprovingly.

"If they pick a fight I'm obviously going to defend myself."

"Darwish, you've been brought up in the house of a servant of the Quran. Why don't you behave more like your brother Ashur?"

"He's not my brother!" snapped Darwish fiercely.

The sheikh withdrew into angry silence.

Ashur had been following the conversation intently. He was shocked, although he had been expecting it. He did what he could to contribute to the household and was never asked to do more. He cleaned the house, shopped in the market, accompanied his benefactor to al-Husayn every morning for the dawn prayer, drew water, lit the oven, and in the late afternoon sat at the sheikh's feet while he instructed him in the Quran and taught him how to lead a decent life. The sheikh loved him and was pleased with how he was turning out. Sakina used to gaze fondly at him and remark, "He's going to be a good, strong lad."

"May he use his strength to serve his fellows, and not the devil," the sheikh would say.

5.

The heavens showered their blessings on Ashur and as the years went by the sheikh rejoiced in him as much as he despaired of Darwish, his own brother and foster child. Why, Lord, when they were reared under the same roof? But once he had set his heart against learning, Darwish moved out of reach of the sheikh's influence as he went in search of a living. He set off into the world a fresh-faced boy and was schooled by harshness and violence before

he was fully grown, and before his spirit had acquired strength and purity. Right from the beginning, Ashur responded to the beauty and radiance in the world, to the harmonies of the sacred anthems. He grew huge like the monastery door, tall and broad, with arms as solid as the stones of the old city wall and legs like the trunks of mulberry trees. He had a large, noble head and strong well-proportioned features where the sap of life flowed abundantly. His strength showed in his zeal for work, his endurance, his cheerful persistence. The sheikh often said to him, "May your strength be used to serve your fellows, and not the devil."

One day the sheikh announced that he wanted to make him a reciter of the Quran like himself.

"Don't you think the sight of his huge frame would be enough to frighten off his audience?" laughed Darwish scathingly.

The sheikh ignored this remark but was forced to abandon his plan when it became clear that Ashur's voice was not up to it. It went out of tune easily, had no sweetness or flexibility, and lacked clarity, so that it sounded as if he were singing in a tunnel. Furthermore, he was incapable of learning a long chapter by heart.

Ashur was content with what he did, happy with his life, and imagined he would remain in this paradise till the end of time. He believed what he was told, that the sheikh had taken charge of him at the death of his parents, good people cut down in their prime, and thanked God that in His mercy and might He had provided him with a home whose kindness was unrivaled by any other in the alley. Then one day Sheikh Afra decided his upbringing and education were complete and it was time to send him to learn a trade. However, events overtook the sheikh, he fell ill with a fever which popular remedies failed to cure, and went to join his Maker. Sakina found herself with no income or means of supporting herself, and went back to her village in Qalyubiyya. She and Ashur parted tearfully. She kissed him, uttered a charm to protect him from evil, and left. All at once he felt alone in the world, at the mercy of his inflexible new master, Darwish Zaydan.

He closed his heavy eyelids, deep in thought, feeling that things were sliding into a gulf of emptiness, that he wanted to climb the sun's rays, melt away in a dewdrop, or ride the wind that

rumbled through the archway; but a voice in his heart told him that the emptiness would be filled with the power of God's spirit and the earth would live again.

6.

Darwish examined him as he squatted dejectedly by the oven. What a giant! With the jaws of a beast of prey and mustaches like a ram's horns. A redundant, shiftless power, doomed to lie fallow. Lucky he had never learned a trade, but he should guard against underestimating him. Why did he dislike him? As he sat hunched, rooted to the floor, he reminded him of a sharp rock blocking the way, a dust-laden blast of hot wind, an open tomb on a feast day, disquieting and provocative. Damn him! He ought to use him somehow! "How will you earn a living?" he asked, not looking at him.

Ashur opened his large deepset eyes and said resignedly, "I'm at your service, master Darwish."

"I don't need any help," said Darwish coldly.

"Then I'll have to go away."

He hesitated, then added hopefully, "Won't you let me go on living here? It's the only home I've known."

"It's not a hotel."

The oven's mouth gaped, dark and lifeless, and from the shelf above came the rustle of a mouse scampering over dry garlic stalks.

Darwish cleared his throat. "Where will you go?"

"The world's a big place."

"And harsher than you think. You don't know the first thing about it," said Darwish scornfully.

"At least I'll find work and get a living."

"Your body's the biggest obstacle. You won't find lodgings and no tradesman will take you on. And you're almost twenty. Too old to learn a trade."

"I've never used my strength to harm anyone."

Darwish laughed loudly.

"No one will trust you all the same," he said. "The clan chiefs will see you as a rival, and the merchants as a bandit and a thug."

Then he added evenly, "You'll starve to death if you don't make use of your strength to survive."

"As God's my witness," exclaimed Ashur with passion, "I'll gladly give it in the service of others."

"If you don't get rid of your stupid notions, it will do you no good at all."

Ashur gave him a bewildered look, then said, "Let me work as a porter with you."

"I've never been a porter in my life," Darwish replied derisively.

"But . . ."

"Forget it. What did you expect?"

"What is your job then?"

"If you're patient, I'll find you some work. Take it or leave it."

Sounds of a funeral ceremony could be heard from the graveyard. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," remarked Darwish.

"I'm famished!" said Ashur, losing patience.

Darwish handed him a small coin. "That's the last time I give you charity," he warned.

Ashur left the house as dusk settled over the graves and the open country. It was a summer's evening and a gentle breeze blew, smelling of damp earth and basil. He went along the path to the little square. He could make out the archway in the darkness and the dim shapes of the mulberry trees over the walls of the monastery gardens. The songs rose into the air, impenetrable as always, and he resolved to lay his cares aside.

"Don't be sad, Ashur," he told himself. "You have countless brothers in this world."

The singing echoed in his head:

*Ay furughe mahe hosn az ruye rakħahane shoma
Abruye kħubi az chahe zanaħħdane shoma*

Ashur took deep breaths of the night air. The stars' bright gaze flowed into his heart. His soul soared up to the clear summer sky.

What better night could there be than this to fall to his knees in worship, give voice to hidden desires, call upon loved ones beyond the veil of the unknown?

A shadowy figure stood a few paces from him, clouding his serenity, dragging him back to the world of trouble.

“What are you doing here, master Darwish?” he inquired in his husky voice.

Darwish punched him in the chest.

“Lower your voice, you fool!” he said in an angry whisper.

The two men stood close up against a hedge bordering the graveyard, on the side that overlooked the desert. The hills were far to their right, the graves to their left. There was not a sound, nobody passing by. Even the souls of the dead seemed absent at this hour of the night. Vague notions took on substance in the darkness and became forebodings, and Ashur’s heart beat anxiously.

“Tell me what you’re up to, for the love of God,” he whispered.

“Wait,” scolded Darwish. “Can’t you be patient?”

He leaned toward him and went on, “I’m not asking you to do anything. I’ll do it all. Just cover my back if you need to.”

“But I don’t know what you’re going to do.”

“Shut up. Nobody’s forcing you to stay.”

A sound floated up from the desert. The scent of a living creature was carried on the breeze and an old man’s voice apparently encouraging an animal.

Soon they could make him out, sitting astride a donkey. As he drew level with them Darwish jumped on him. Ashur was astonished. His worst fears were realized. He could see nothing clearly, but he heard Darwish’s voice threatening, “Hand over your money.”

“Have mercy. You’re hurting me,” said a voice trembling with old age and terror.

Ashur rushed forward without stopping to think. “Let him go!” he shouted.

“Shut your mouth!” screamed Darwish.

“I said let him go.”

He wrapped his arms around Darwish’s waist and hoisted

him off his feet. Darwish elbowed him frantically in the chest and cursed loudly. Ashur immobilized him so that only his tongue still moved, then turned to the old man. "Go in peace," he said.

Only when he was sure the man had escaped did he release Darwish. "I'm sorry if I was rough," he said apologetically.

"Ungrateful bastard!"

"But I saved you from doing something you'd regret."

"You miserable idiot! Begging's all you're fit for!"

"God forgive you."

"Dirty bastard!"

Saddened, Ashur fell silent.

"You're a bastard. Don't you understand? It's the truth."

"Don't let your anger get the better of you. The sheikh told me where I came from."

"I'm telling you the truth. He found you on the path where your whore mother left you," said Darwish venomously.

"God rest them all."

"On my honor and my brother's soul, you're just a bastard. Why else would they have got rid of a newborn baby in the middle of the night?"

Offended, Ashur said nothing.

"You've wasted my good work. Thrown away an opportunity to make some money. You might be strong, but you're a coward. You've just proved it."

He landed a punch full in Ashur's face. Ashur, stunned by his first direct experience of physical violence, did nothing.

"Coward! Weakling!" shouted Darwish in a fury.

A wave of anger swept over Ashur, its violence shattering the sanctuary of night. With the flat of his great hand he struck his master on the head. Darwish sank to the floor, unconscious. Ashur struggled with his anger, forcing himself to calm down, and realized the gravity of what he had done.

"Forgive me, Sheikh Afra," he muttered.

He lifted Darwish in his arms and made his way among the graves to the house, where he laid him down on the sofa, lit the lamp, and stood watching him, full of anxiety and remorse. The

The Harafish

minutes dragged by. At last Darwish opened his eyes and moved his head feebly.

Rage flickered in his eyes, showing that he remembered. The two men looked at one another in silence. Ashur felt as if Afra and Sakina were there, watching them sorrowfully.

He left the house. "God knows what's going to happen to me now," he murmured.

8.

Ashur wandered here and there. He slept on the ground, which is father and mother to the homeless, getting food where he could. On warm nights he slept below the wall of the monastery and on cold nights under the archway. He finally believed what Darwish had told him about his origins. The bitter truth hounded him and closed around him. A few nights in Darwish's company had taught him more about the realities of the world than twenty years spent under the wing of the good sheikh Afra. The wicked are harsh but honest teachers. He was a child of sin. The sinners had vanished, leaving him to face the world alone. Maybe he lived on as a painful memory in some restless heart.

His grief made him listen to the songs from the monastery more eagerly than ever. The meanings of their sweetly intoned cadences were hidden from him behind a veil of Persian, just as he imagined his mother and father were hidden behind the faces of strangers. One day he might find his mother, or his father, or discover the meanings of the words. Perhaps some of the riddles would be solved, he would cry tears of happiness, find cherished desires realized in the person of someone he loved. He spent hours gazing at the monastery garden, with its graceful, arching trees, grassy lawns, and trilling birds, and at the dervishes moving nimbly in their flowing robes and tall felt hats.

"Why do they do menial tasks like the poor?" he mused one day. "They sweep, lay the dust, water the plants. Perhaps they need a reliable servant."

The great door was calling him, whispering to him to knock

and enter. The joy and serenity of the place scared him. He was in the garden, a fruit swollen with sweet juices, leaves yielding silk. A pure hand will come to pluck you in ecstasy.

The soft whisper won him over. He approached the door and called out modestly, politely to the men of God.

He called again and again, to no avail. They were hiding. No one answered. Even the birds regarded him suspiciously. The men of God didn't know his language, nor he theirs. The stream stopped flowing; the grass and flowers stopped dancing. Nothing needed him.

His enthusiasm waned. His inspiration was stifled. He was covered in confusion. He reproached himself for the strength of his feelings and struggled to control his will.

"Don't let yourself become the talk of the neighborhood," he told himself, tugging on his splendid mustache. "Forget about people who refuse your help and look for someone who needs you."

After this he earned his living any way he could, helping at weddings and funerals, acting as a porter or an errand boy, grateful for the odd coin or loaf of bread, or even a kind word.

One day an ugly man with a rat face accosted him: "Hey, boy!"

Ashur went up to him politely, ready to help.

"Don't you know me?" asked the man.

"Forgive me. I'm a stranger," answered Ashur, embarrassed.

"But you come from this alley?"

"I've only lived in it a short time."

"Kulayb al-Samani. I'm one of the clan chief's men."

"Pleased to meet you, master."

The man stared hard at him, then asked, "Will you join us?"

"I haven't the stomach for it," replied Ashur, without hesitation.

Kulayb laughed scornfully. "The body of an ox and the heart of a bird," he said, turning to go.

Ashur used to see Zayn al-Naturi's donkey tied up in the stable after a hard day's work. He took to brushing her, feeding her, sweeping the yard and sprinkling it with fresh water, never asking anything in return.