locks and sheepards were scattered over the rock hillsides, under the terebinths in barren places where the mountain rose nourishes and even in winding little valleys where lights gleamed and sparkled amid the rustling, glittering durrah plants; greeny-yellow summer motes under which dust gathered in little piles that were rounded like nuts ground down to gray flour when the foot touches them, and retaining the sense of ripe, good earth. Little groups of sheep were wandering over the slopes and valleys as they grazed, while the hilltops were shaded by olive trees on either side. It was clearly impossible to penetrate any deeper without attracting attention; and that would promptly rob our patrol of its purpose.

So we sat down on the stones to rest awhile and allow our running sweat to cool off in the sunlight. Summer was buzzing all around like a golden beehive. The medley of golden mountain fields, of green durrah turning gold, of green hills, dark green olive leaves and their grayish-umber trunks, the blazing sky and the vast, almighty silence
were simply dazzling. From time to time they bemused the heart so that one longed for some happy word.

Distant shepherds somewhere beyond were leading their flocks tranquilly across the unchanged fields and quiet hills, with the casual stride of those good times when trouble had not yet come. It nipped at one in a fashion that presaged something very different. Nearby there were flocks grazing, flocks belonging to the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Somewhere in the vicinity the distant village slumbered, with its frieze of olives, a kind of dull copper. In the hollow hillsides the ewes were thronging together. There were mountains in the distance.

Our CO stared for a long time through his field glasses, puffing his cigarette and preparing his plans. Number one, there was no point going further. Number two, going back empty-handed was simply unthinkable. One of the shepherds, or one of the boys, or maybe several of them, would have to be caught or else something would have to be done. Alternatively something would have to be burnt, and then they could return with results, with real and undeniable facts.

This commander of ours was a middle-sized chap with deep-set eyes and eyebrows joining together. He was baldish in front and wore his cap in such a way that his forehead and what little hair he had left were open to the breeze. We watched him as he made his survey. He saw whatever it was that he saw. As for us, we could see a world of hills, all woolly with greenstuff and stony ground and olives in the distance, a world crisscrossed and bedappled with little golden hollows and dips of durrab. So entirely was it such a world that it infused a silence in one together with a longing for good fruitful soil that warms like a flame. It enticed one and made one wish for the roll that is accompanied by bending and stretching, it made one wish for grayish sandy dust for all that is required at the height of the harvesting; for anything rather than being a member of the rank and file while the commander was working out how he would fling us across this chunk of afternoon silence.

What was more, he was well-nigh ready and prepared. In the shadow of a youthfully green tree we had already discovered a shepherd with his sheep before him, at rest among the growing durrab. A sudden circle drew tight within the universe. Everything both beyond and within that circle was concentrated on a single person, who had to be taken alive. The huntsmen were already on the way. Most of us were to take cover in the undergrowth and amid the flattish rocks on the right while to the left and moving downward the CO would set off with two or three others in order to encircle the quarry, make a sudden onslaught and drive him into the arms of those lying in ambush above.

We stole into the heart of the gentle durrab. Our heels trod on the chewed shoots and stubble that had been gnawed by those selfsame flocks. Our hobnailed soles kissed the dust, both brown and grayish. We took full advantage of the area at our disposal, the topography, the natural vegetation and the shelter to be gained from blind spots. Then we came bursting at a gallop down on the fellow seated on a stone in the tree's shadow. Panic-stricken he jumped to his feet, flung away his staff and ran like a fleeing hind, vanishing to the other side of the slope right into the arms of the huntsmen.

That was a joke, that was! Funny wasn't the word for it! But our CO was always on the job. He was already full of a bright new idea and that was really tricky and clever. We would finish the job properly collecting the sheep as well. He clapped his hands and then rubbed his palms together in genial self-satisfaction, as much as to say: "That's the ticket!"

Someone swallowed his spit and remarked: "There'll be goulash for us, I can tell you!" We all set to work cheerfully with the satisfaction of victors, and the prospects of a reward for all our labors. Now he became genuinely enthusiastic: "Get on with it, quick!"

But the trouble was, all this excitement had frightened the sheep. Some of them had raised their heads, some were preparing to run away, and some wanted to know just what those who were preparing to do something were actually preparing to do. Besides, how does one handle sheep? We proved to be a mockery and a derision.

Our CO made that quite clear, insisting that a pack of
schoolteachers like us and idiots like us were good for nothing except to mess up anything that was fine and good. Then he began with a brrrrr and a grrrr and a te-ee-e, te-ee-e, and all the other noises that have been the basis of communication between shepherd and flock since time began. What was more, nothing would satisfy him except to have one of us go ahead as a wether, baaiing all the way along, while two more on either side flourished their rifles as though they were shepherds' staffs and burst into song as though they were shepherds keeping their flocks amused. Behind them another three or so were to walk in exactly the same way, in order that our energy and wide laughter might help us control our hesitant and somewhat confused stupidity, so that we would end up better and finer, in brief, as soldiers.

Amid all this confusion we simply forgot that on the other side of a rock down on the slope there sat, in between two rifle butts and two pairs of hobnailed shoes, a prisoner who was trembling like a rabbit. A man of forty or so he was, with a drift of mustache around his mouth, a stupid nose and somewhat open lips and eyes; except that the latter had been blindfolded with his own kaffiyeh in order that he should see nothing. Though I don’t know what the nothing was that he was not supposed to see.

“Stand up!” they ordered when the CO came over to inspect the spoils of war at close quarters and look him up and down. What they said to the CO was: “Did you really think we wouldn’t catch him? Of course we did! And how! There’s no nonsense with us. Not a single bullet, but he understood he’d better put his hands up. That’s certain sure!”

“You’re good and iron!” the CO approved of them. “Sheep and shepherd together, just imagine! What will they say when we get back! Perfectly lovely!” He took a look at the prisoner and found him to be a little sort of fellow in a faded yellow robe, shivering as he breathed through the kerchief bound over his eyes. His sandals were trodden down, all of a piece, he had a hooflike leg, and alas-this-is-the-very-end was inscribed all over his hunched shoulders.

“Uncover his eyes and tie his hands together. He’ll lead the flock ahead of us!” Our CO had had another of those flashes of genius which the intoxication of battle engendered in him so plentifully.

At that a spark of delight flashed from one to the other of us. Good. They took off his black agal, which is the rope of horsehair worn around the kaffiyeh, otherwise known as the headcloth. They wrapped the agal around his hands, pulled it and bound and knotted it tight for a second and a third time. Then they took the blindfold off the frightened fellow’s eyes and nose and addressed him thus: “N ABI el anam kudmanat!” Meaning, lead the flock ahead of us.

I don’t know what the prisoner thought to himself when his eyes saw the light, nor what was going on in his heart nor what his blood said or roared or what was going on frustratedly inside him. All I know is—he began gnashing and puffing at his flock as though nothing had ever gone wrong. Down he went from rock to rock through the undergrowth, the way shepherds always go down from rock to rock through the undergrowth. The astonished and frightened sheep followed him, while behind them and around them came our hoarse voices, our kicking legs and the buffeting of our rifles as we went down into the valley, carelessly guffawing.

So busy were we with all this that we paid no attention to several other shepherds who suddenly started up and vanished over the line of the hilltops, crowded as those were with golden silence and speechless melancholy. They gathered silently, driving off their flocks while managing to keep an eye on us from the distance. Nor had we noticed the sun which all this noisy while was going gradually lower, gradually growing more golden until suddenly, as we came around the mountain spur, we were smitten by a huge and dazzling wave of brilliance, glazed, dusty, glowing and flaming, so that it seemed to be a kind of silent remote rebuke, and a great outcry even more.

Naturally we had no time to spare for all that. We had to worry about the sheep and the prisoner. The former were bleating and scattering, while the latter was cringing and turning dumb. A kind of dull stupidity had fallen upon him, a sort of stupefaction in which everything was lost and in face of which all was beyond despair. He
merely strode along, silent and unhappy, growing more and more bemused and stupefied.

It would take too long to describe how we moved through the valleys amid the hills with all their crowded golden silence, through all the summer tranquility; how the frightened sheep were hurried along in a fashion to which they were not accustomed; and how our prisoner continued to be as dumbly silent as an uprooted plant. Indeed, he was growing miserable to the point of mockery, alarmed and startling and quivering and tumbling over with the kerchief which was, of course, tied round his forehead, whenever he was given a sudden tug. He grew steadily more alarmed and startled, not to say ridiculous after a fashion, though virtually untouchable. And meanwhile the durrach went on yellowing, the sun added its silent pride, the dusty paths between the ends of the fields and the flank of the mountain absorbed our fit and proper paces, as though they were silently bearing some additional burden. In brief, we were returning to base.

All the marks of a strongpoint began to emerge. There was an emptiness, a fine dust, a desolation. Echoes ceased abruptly. A forsaken ant-hill, the rags and tatters of human life. The mustiness of don't-give-a-damn. A stinking, flea-bitten, lice-infested existence. The poverty and doltishness of miserable villages. All of a sudden their outskirts, their homes, their courtyards, their inmost sanctums had been laid bare. All of a sudden their clothes had been flung over their faces, their shameful nakedness displayed, and here they were, poverty-stricken, withered and stinking. A sudden emptiness, an apoplectic death. Strange, rancorous orphanhood. In the heat of the day the place seemed to be squinting through a haze of dust, uncertain whether it was mournfully lamenting or simply bored or whether it mattered either way.

Over above, to be sure, they wandered about in the gray plumpish trenches, those citizens whose food was not food, whose water was not water, whose day was not day and whose night was not night, and may the devil take whatever they might do or whatever might happen, devil take what used to be decent and pleasant and customary, in short devil take everything. So let us stink good and proper and grow beards and talk smut and muck. Let sweaty clothes stick to unwashed bodies with all their sores and pimples. And let us shoot the stray dogs so that they also begin to stink. And let us sit down in the sticky dust with the smell of the burnt tires all around, and sleep in the muck and case-harden our hearts, all because nothing mattered.

The identifying marks of the outpost became clearer. We marched more proudly. What magnificent spoils of war were we bringing with us! Rhythm entered into our feet. The sheep were bleating and flowing along in confusion. The prisoner, over whose nose and eyes the kerchief had been replaced for security reasons, was dragging his sandals and shambling helplessly along in his semi-blindness, generous and hearty curses accompanying him. Apart from all of which our satisfaction was growing and swelling, our genuine pleasure at this achievement, this real enterprise. We were sweating and dusty, so solderly, such he-men. What words we could use to describe our CO! And it is easy to imagine the way we were received and how everybody roared with laughter and cheerful self-satisfaction, just like barrels with burst hoops.

Someone busting with laughter, the sweat running all over him, came up to our CO, pointed to the blindfolded prisoner and asked casually:

"Is that him? Settling him? Give me!" And our CO, still grinning as he gulped some water down, wiped off his own sweat and answered glisteningly:

"Just you sit down quietly over there, it isn't yours."

The gang all around burst out laughing to hear it all. Who gave a damn for strong point, for trouble, for the whole set up, for the whole snafu, for freedom and anything of the kind as long as we had all this? Oh, we were old horses. The harness did not gall us any longer. On the contrary. It covered any number of healed and unhealed sores and fitted well over the hollows of the spine which was no longer straight after the hard times we had gone through.

Then someone came along and photographed the whole kaboodle. When he went on leave he would develop the films and make
photos of them. Someone else came up behind the prisoner, shook his fist this way and that with real appetite and gleefully crawled back among the others. As for a third, he simply didn’t know whether that was nice or not, whether they ought to behave like that or not. He spent his time looking this way and that, seeking support in either direction.

And there was one who simply emptied a pitcher of water down his throat, gulping with flashing teeth and without closing his mouth, while meanwhile a finger of his left hand notified all and sundry that as soon as he had finished this gulping he would go on with his “that’s the way things are.” And there was another fellow in an undershirt who stared in curiosity and astonishment. He bore bad teeth over which many dentists had bent. Behind him were sleepless nights and narrow airless rooms and a thin and venomous woman and unemployment and party activities. All of them had labored and toiled in order to eliminate his everlasting. “Well and what’s going to happen now? What’s going to happen?” But they had all toiled in vain.

And then there were others who had regular jobs, and some who were on their way up the ladder, and some who were everlastingly helpless and incorrigibly unfortunate; and some who spent all their time at the cinema, or the Habima and Ohel and Matateh theaters, and who read the weekend supplements of two different papers. And there were others who could lecture you for hours on end about Horace and Isaiah the Prophet and Haim Nahman Bialik, and even about Shakespeare. Some loved their children and their wives dreadfully, together with the little garden by the home and the slippers indoors. Some hated favoritism and demanded fair and equal chances for all, and started yelling even at those things that scarcely had any scent of unfairness about them. Some were so furious at rent and taxes that everything decent within them had turned quite sour. Some were not at all what they were thought to be, while others were precisely and exactly what they were and the way people sized them up.

Now all of them stood in a cheerful ring around a prisoner with his eyes covered by a kerchief and who, what was more, chose this particular moment to stick out one of his thick hands, of which you could never judge whether they were dirty or not, or anything else apart from their belonging to a villager. And what he said was this: “Fi sigara?” His voice was noisy and creaking, and astonished them as much as if the wall of the house had started to screech. It immediately gained the applause of those with a sense of the ridiculous, and the restraining fingers of others who were sensitive to impudence.

Maybe somebody there even began to think of giving him a cigarette, but finally the matter was settled in a more military fashion. Two of the group commanders accompanied by an assistant commander came out of the H.Q.; just then. They took the prisoner and led him off. Being blindfolded, he had no alternative except to rest his arm on the Group Commander accompanying him. The latter slipped his arm through the prisoner’s and supported him firmly. In addition he said whatever had to be said to make him improve his hesitant shuffle.

For a little while it seemed as though they were both trying to get past obstacles without trouble. They helped one another as though they belonged together. So much so, indeed, that a moment before they reached the building this queer fellow croaked and repeated the words he had croaked before, “Fi sigara?”

Those syllables messed everything up. The fellow supporting him dropped the hand that he had almost been holding as they walked arm-in-arm. He shook himself free from all contact and raised his eyebrows angrily, almost insulted, as much as to say, “Have you seen the like!”

It was so sudden that the unprepared fellow stumbled over the step leading into the house. He tottered, almost falling on his face as he suddenly burst into the room. Startled, he tried to prevent himself from falling, pushing a chair away and pulling up at the table, helpless, heavy and almost in a state of shock at all the mishaps that had already happened to him and those that might next befall. He let his hand drop and helplessly resigned himself to whatever would happen.

At the table sat sternly official higher officers, solemnly waiting. The fellow’s unexpected entry confused what they had already prepared
in their minds, in the way of atmosphere and sentry at the door. The group commanders and others had to start pulling themselves together and organizing it all afresh. No wonder it annoyed them.

The man in the center was tall, with stiff hair and a keen, well-muscled face. To his left sat none other than our Section Commander, his very own self. Now you could see that he really was bald enough, and that the hair at his temples was turning white while there were still a few strands on the front part of his head. There was a crumpled cigarette in his mouth and he was sweating as he took it easy, the hero of the day. He was only at the beginning of his achievements, what was more.

A little further away by the wall, in demonstrative isolation, lounged a young fellow who was watching through lowered lids like one who knows a very specific truth and was waiting to discover how, in the last resort and without any possible alternative, that very specific truth out of all others would be revealed.

"What's your name?"

The tall fellow started his investigation very suddenly. The prisoner, still confused by his entry, paid no attention to the question. The chap leaning against the wall ran a wrinkle of certainty down to his lips as though he had expected that as well beforehand.

"What's your name?" the tall fellow now repeated, hissing the words.

"Who? Me?" the shepherd jumped and lifted a hesitant hand to the kerchief over his eyes. He pulled it away again halfway as though he had been scorched.

"Your name?" the bristly-haired fellow repeated once more, very clearly and with full accentuation.

"Hassan," croaked the other, moving his head in an effort to enhance his attention, in order to make up for his novel absence of sight.

"Hassan what?"

"Hassan Ahmad," he said more rapidly as though being shunted onto rails; and he nodded his head in confirmation.

"How old?"

"Can't say," he shrugged his shoulders, rubbing the palms of his hands together, wishing to be helpful.

"How old?"

"I simply don't know, ya sidi," he croaked through his fleshy lips, half-smiling for some reason so that his drift of mustache danced gently. "Twenty, or maybe thirty-two," he gladly contributed to the joint session.

"Well, and what's going on in your village?" the tall fellow went on with the same accented tranquility, a tranquility which was stressed and presaged the rage that would follow. It was a tranquility of petty and highly original cunning toward what comes, circling around and around from a distance, then suddenly striking straight at the main artery in the very middle of the breast.

"They are working in the village, ya sidi," the prisoner sketched a picture of village life as he sensed some impending evil.

"Working, eh! Just as usual?" The questioner took a tiny step along the spider's web. One of the numerous threads began vibrating and announcing the prey.

"Yes, ya sidi," the fly insisted on invading the entangling threads. It was absolutely obvious that he would begin to lie now. At this point he would undoubtedly lie. It was his duty to lie and we would catch him at it, the contemptible cur; and we would show him. Yet just as it was clear that we would get nothing out of him this way, that he would say nothing, so it was clear that, this time, us, those of us who were present, he would not mislead, oh no, not us; and he would have plenty to say.

"And who is there in the village?" the hawk retracted its wings directly above its quarry.

"Ah—eh?" the prisoner did not grasp the question, and licked his lips as an animal might.

"Jews? Englishmen? Frenchmen?" The questioner went on like a teacher setting a trap for a pupil; just to catch him, just to find out and that's all.

"No, ya sidi, there are no Jews, only Arabs," he answered gravely, not in the least as though he were trying to dodge the issue. Once
The Prisoner

more he forgetfully raised his hand to the kerchief covering his eyes, as though the danger had already passed. The questioner glanced around at his comrades in the room, as much as to say: “You see! Now it's going to begin. That's how it is when you know how to get the facts.’

“Are you married?” he began again from another flank. “And have you any children? And where is your father? And how many brothers have you? And where do people get their water in the village?” He went on spinning his fine net of investigation, this tall fellow. The one being investigated labored and toiled to give satisfaction. He moved his hands in exaggerated, meaningless fashion, shifting his head about, stammering and stammering and giving tiny details which annoyed the investigators and confused him himself. He had a story to tell about two daughters and a son, but the son had gone away and his sisters were not entirely not to blame for it, and had become sick and died and departed this world. In the middle of it all he thrust his thumb against his back ribs, and scratched there, up and down. He pressed all four fingers against the thumb in his endeavors, while stammering for the one word he wanted. Simply disgusting it was, for those listening to him.

There was a pause. The sentry at the door shifted from foot to foot.

The grimace on the face of the fellow leaning against the wall, and the way our bald CO stood beside the table, suddenly made it clear that it was not correct for the prisoner to have nothing to add. Nothing would help, blows were necessary.

“Listen, Hassan,” the questioner now said. “In that village of yours, are there any Egyptians?”

Now he'll be talking. Now it will begin. Now he'll start lying.

“There are,” answered the prisoner with disappointing frankness.

“There are ...” echoed the questioner with a measure of dubiousness that contained a certain dissatisfaction, as if somebody had given him something too early. He lit a cigarette as he began to meditate whether he should now move his castle or his knight.

Our own CO began striding up and down the room. He moved the kicked-away chair back into place, fixed his tunic within his trousers, turned his back on us and stared out of the window with obvious dissatisfaction. The chap by the wall also ran his hand over his face and gently pinched his nose. Breathing deep and presenting a shrewd countenance as much as to say: “You have to know how to take things in hand!”

“How many are there?”

“Can’t say exactly, not many.”

(Ah, now the lying begins. This must be a lie. There'll have to be some slapping about.)

“How many are there?”

“Ten or fifteen maybe, about that.”

“Listen, Hassan, you'd better tell the truth.”

“The truth, ya sidi, it is all the truth.”

“And don't lie.”

“Aye, ya sidi.” The prisoner did not know what to do with his hands which had remained spread out ahead of him. He let them drop.

“And there's no monkey business with us!” the tall fellow boiled over and added since it had to be added: “How many soldiers are there in your village?”

“Fifteen.”

“A lie!”

Our bald CO, who had been looking out of the window, now turned his head. His eyes were smiling. He was beginning to feel the pleasure a man knows when he is due to enjoy something in another moment, and meanwhile there is satisfaction in restraining that pleasure for the additional sweet moment that will exist later. He thrust a cigarette in the smiling corner of his compressed lips and lit it. The five with open eyes in the room all exchanged the same secret, satisfied gaze. The sentry at the door shifted from one foot to the other once again.

“By my life, ya sidi, fifteen!”

“No more?”
“Abadan, no more.”

“How do you know there are no more?” That was how the questioner dexterously proved there was no fooling him. Maybe he showed a trifle too much shrewdness.

“There are no more.”

“What if there are more?” (What can anyone answer to that?)

“There are no more.”

There is no saying where the kick suddenly came from. Flashing from its self-restraint and finally liberating itself slantwise, uncomfortably, for lack of the necessary distance for a real good kick, shaking up the prisoner who was quite unprepared with his covered eyes. He suddenly cried out with astonishment rather than with pain, and stumbled against the table. It all seemed so much more like an unfair game than a means of getting at the facts. It was something unexpected and unnatural, something that was not what was needed, not that at all.

“Talk up now, and see you tell the truth!”

“Ya sidi, by my eyes, by Allah, fifteen!”

The chap by the wall was clearly apprehensive that someone might believe the blatant lie. In his hands he held a long stick which he ran between his fingers with the gracious motion of a nobleman drawing his sword. Silently he placed it on the table.

Questions went on piling up. Swiftly presented questions. Without an interval. From time to time they were besprinkled, and more and more easily and naturally, first with one kick and then with another. Cold kicks, kicked without anger, steadily more skillful. From time to time they seemed not to be added at the right point. But from time to time it became even clearer that they were absolutely necessary.

For if you are out for the truth, then you have to hit. If the man lies, then hit. If he does tell the truth, don’t believe it but hit him so that he shouldn’t lie later on. Hit just in case there may be some other truth. Hit because it is a habit. Just as shaking the tree brings down the ripe fruit, so beating the prisoner gives rise to the maximum possible truth. Obviously that’s how it is. If anyone thinks different, don’t argue with him. He’s a defeatist, and that kind of fellow shouldn’t make war. Don’t have pity, hit. No one has any pity on you either. And apart from that, these fellows are accustomed to being hit.

By this time they were asking about the submachine guns in the village. An urgent issue that, and it had to be thrashed out. It was impossible to take as much as a single step forward in this connection without using force all the way. Anything else might lead to the shedding of Jewish blood, the blood of our lads; so the business had to be cleared thoroughly. They chewed it up, over and over, again and again. They went back and chewed it from the other side until it began to sink, and they had no choice except to believe that he must be lying. Then followed the business of fortifications. They ordered him to describe the village defenses.

Here the prisoner became absolutely confused. He found them hard to describe. He could not go into abstractions or talk geometry or mathematics. He wagged his hands, he capered about on his legs, he hopped this way and that, he did his best to convince with waving arm. The kerchief over his eyes dimmed everything, made it all meaningless and confused. But in the room it was absolutely clear that none of this could be anything but sheer deliberate falsehood. “You’re a liar,” insisted the examiner despairingly. “I can see by your eyes that you’re a liar!” And he menaced the blindfold with his fist.

They were making no progress. The whole business was boring, and by now they were thoroughly sick of it. They had entangled themselves in a cold and clumsy cross-examination. Nobody was enthusiastic. There was not even any satisfaction in hitting him. So it became even more astonishing when the sound of a whistling stick was heard, coming down from somewhere or other on the prisoner’s back in an alien, discordant thud; something being done as a thoroughly unpleasant duty.

All good and fine. Now came the artillery. The prisoner insisted that the barrels of their cannon were no longer than his arm, starting from the shoulder and finishing at the palm. He demonstrated
the size with chopper-like blows of his left hand aimed at the very root of his right shoulder, and then exactly halfway down the right hand; as much as to say, from here to here, saying it devotedly and sacramentally, hitting again and again until he eliminated all doubt; without knowing whether that was enough or whether he would have to go on and on. And meanwhile a blind grimace entwined itself on his lips and around his mustache.

The questioning petered out miserably. The sentry at the door shifting from one foot to another at his post had been peeping out of the doorway from time to time. Maybe he was seeking something in the bright sky that differed from the sheer mess of this dirty room. Now he began to feel apprehensive. Something dreadful was about to happen and there was no other choice. For what could be left, after all, except to have them tell him to take the carcass along and finish him?

“Well, that’s the way it is.” The examiner stretched back against his chair, wanting to take a breather after all this nonsense. He crushed his cigarette impatiently, dropped it on the floor and crushed it. “I’ll finish him off,” suggested bald-head as he flicked his cigarette through the doorway.

“An absolute dumbbell,” decided one officer. “Just pretending to be a dumbbell,” said the other. “What you have to know is how to talk to him,” said the chap leaning against the wall, twisting his lips in recognition of a truth which they had presumably doubted and denied.

The prisoner had already sensed that there was an interval. He licked his thick lips, struck out his thick hand and said:

“Fi sigara, ya sidi?” (Got a cigarette, mister?) Of course no one paid any attention to the idiot. He waited a few moments, then drew his outstretched hand back, thought the matter over and stood still again, an absolute donkey for you. And only to himself alone did he moan: “Abhh, ya rab.” Meaning: Oh, Lord God.

Well, what next? Where to now? To the quarry slopes in the villages? Or maybe to some torture of the kind that opens mouths and restores truth instead of falsehood? Or was there any other way? How were they to get rid of him? Or maybe... Suppose they were to give him a cigarette and send the dolt back home? Get the hell out of here and we don’t ever want to see you again!

Finally they phoned somewhere or other and spoke to the Assistant Boss himself; and it was decided to send him on to another camp (at least three of the fellows in the room disgustedly turned their noses up at this shamefaced, civilian, namby-pamby trick); a camp where prisoners were questioned and handled the way they deserved. With this end in view the sentry at the door, the same one who had felt uneasy all the time without knowing why, would go off and fetch the dusty Jeep and the growling duty driver who was annoyed at being called out of turn, which was so easily proved by so many facts and also by objurgations. Apart from which, as far as he himself was concerned he did not have the least objection to going off to some place where he could see human beings, but this was a matter of principle, sheer principle. And then another soldier also came and sat down beside the driver, since there was some job which could not be done until now in the absence of transport. He was now given this additional objective of accompanying the prisoner. And that was the way they would pass through the town, Spandau in front and prisoner behind. Burdened with these two functions in order to make sure that never under any circumstances would this trip be deducted from his leave (that being a separate account), he sat and loaded the machine gun.

As for the prisoner, after he had been pushed and began groping around and banged against the side of the car and was helped in, the only place left for him was on the floor where he half-lay, half-kneeled and crouched entirely. Two were in front and the former sentry behind him, his pocket bulging with the proper papers and travel orders and chits and all the rest of it. That afternoon, which had begun some time or other between the hills and the trees and the flocks, was now due to finish in a way nobody could forecast.

They were already out of the smelly village and crossing, from the wadi to the fields, then on through the fields. The Jeep dashed
along bouncing on all fours, and stretches of the not-so-distant future began to be transformed into reality. It was nice to sit facing the fields as they bathed in an increasingly reddish light that comprehended everything in a sweep of tiny bright golden clouds, a light rising higher than anything; than all those things which concern you and me so much, even though they did not in the least matter to the driver or his comrade with the mustache beside him. They smoked, whistled and sang, “In the Negev plains a man defending fell”, and, “Your eyes are bright with a green green light”, one after the other. There was someone else on the floor of the Jeep, but it wasn’t easy to know what could be going on inside him since he was blindfolded, beastlike and silent.

A fuzz of dust rose behind them, a smoky wake which wavered and grew pink at the edges. Irrelevant ditches and unimportant potholes in the road made the Jeep jump, while fields spread their arms out to infinity and gave themselves up to a twilight that was suffused with forgetfulness and gentleness—and something so far away, so far away, so dreamlike—until all of a sudden and unexpectedly a strange thought jumped into his head and would not budge. “The woman, she’s undoubtedly lost.” For up to now it was astonishing where they could have come from, you understand; as though you were thunderstruck to think that here, right here beside you, something was happening; the same thing which in other circumstances is called by other names, and which is also known as Fate.

You’d better take a jump at once, one, two, and get right out from under this bad business. Sing as a second voice to the two in front, set out for distant regions in the twilight through which the sun was burning with a reddish-citron color; only you would at once see again what had so suddenly emerged through the astounding breach.

The fellow here at your feet, his life, his well-being, his home, three souls, the whole thread of his existence with all that was involved, were in your grip somehow or other as though you were some lesser demigod here in the Jeep. The man carried along, the collective flock of sheep and several souls in the mountain village, these variegated threads of life were twined together to be cut or grow inextricably involved, all because you were suddenly their master. If you liked you could just stop the Jeep and let him go free, and everything would cut up differently. But... just a moment. The fellow on the back seat of the little Jeep suddenly felt the spirit darting aloft within him. Just a moment: Let the fellow go?

Here we could stop the Jeep, here by the wadi. We could let the fellow down, uncover his eyes, face him toward the mountains, point straight ahead and tell him: Go home, man, go straight along. Take care about that hill, there are Jews on it. Take care and don’t fall into our hands again. And then he would take his feet over and dash home. He would go back home. Precisely that. And listen, what a story! The dreadful, tense waiting, the fate of a woman and her children (an Arab woman!). Forebodings at the heart that wrestled with the decree of Fate, wondering will he, won’t he come back, guessing what might happen next; and then everything solved satisfactorily so that she could breathe easily, he’s condemned to life. Hi lad, come and let’s let the fellow go!

And why not? What was to stop it? Simple, decent and human. So just get up and tell the driver to stop. No more fine phrases about humanity any longer. This time it’s up to you yourself. This time it’s not someone else’s malice, this time it’s your own conscience you’re facing. Let him off and you’ve saved him. Today that alternative, that ominous, tremendous alternative we always used to talk about so nervously, is firmly in your own two hands. There’s no dodging it now, not with Soldier, not with Orders, and not with Suppose they caught you, not even with What will the boys say. You’re standing nuked, facing your duty. And the choice is all your own, nobody else’s.

Then stop the Jeep. Stop the driver. Let the poor devil go. You don’t have to give any reasons. It’s his right and your duty. If there’s any meaning or sense in this war, now’s the time for it to be seen. Men, men, there was a man and they sent him home. Snap your fingers at all this customary cruelty and send the fellow away. Just release him. Hallelujah! That peasant, that shepherd would go home to his wife.

There could be no alternative. Otherwise years would pass
and then in some remarkable way he would go free and return to
the mountains to look for his wife and his home. And meanwhile
they would be starving refugees going from bad to worse, sick with
typhoid, so much human dust. And who would say what that mean-
while would be or where it would be and even that it would be, pro-
vided only that meanwhile some fellow somewhere or other doesn’t
simply knock him off and send him to heaven by sheer chance, or
maybe not just by sheer chance.

Why don’t you stop the Jeep then? It’s your duty. You can’t
dodge it. That has become so clear, it’s hard to wait until you decide
to do it. This is where you stand up, this is where you do it. Say a
word to the driver, tell him and the other fellow it’s the order, spin
them a yarn, tell them anything—and you don’t need to do even that.
You don’t need to explain, you don’t need to tell them anything. No
matter what may happen. There was once a man. Just look at the
way things are. Let him go. (How can I? He isn’t mine. He isn’t in
my hands. That’s not correct, I’m not his master, I’m an agent and
nothing more. What have I done wrong? Since when am I responsi-
ble for the hard-heartedness of others?)

Stop it! That’s shameful evasion. That’s how every scamp dodges
a decision and hides himself behind a “no alternative” that has gone
shabby with use. Where’s your sense of honor? Where’s that far-famed
independence of thought? Where’s the freedom, three cheers for free-
edom, the love of liberty? Let him go! By all means, and then be pre-
pared to give an account of what you’ve done. It’s an honor. All your
words, all your complaints, all your dissatisfaction about trifles and
oppression, all your thoughts about ways of forcing yourself to move
toward truth and freedom—where are they all? Today the account has
been presented, it’s payday. So pay up my lad, pay up, it’s all yours
now. (I can’t. I’m only an agent. Besides it’s wartime and this fellow
comes from the other side which is fighting us. Maybe he is a futile
victim. Yet as for me I mustn’t free him and I haven’t the power to
do it. Here’s a fresh idea for you. Everybody begins releasing and
where are we? Or maybe he really does know something important
and merely pretends to be a fool?)

Is that the case? Then is the fellow a soldier? Have you caught
him with a weapon in hand? Where have you fetched him from?
He isn’t a fighter. He’s a stinking, miserable civilian. All that pris-
oner-of-war business is a lie, and don’t you forget it. It’s a crime, it
is. Have you questioned him? Then set him free now. More than he
has already told they certainly won’t get out of him. And the cost of
one extra item of information is not worth the suppression of truth
in his release.

(Hard for me to decide. I don’t dare. Many unpleasant things
simply have to be done. Talk to the driver, explain it to the other fel-
low, face the investigations afterward, get into a hell of a fix because
of some miserable Hassan; quite apart from which it’s not at all clear
that he must be released here and now, before he has been properly
questioned and put through the mill.)

Nonsense! If anybody else knew only a quarter of what you
know and the conclusions you’ve reached about truth and freedom,
he would stop the Jeep here and now and send the fellow packing.
Then go on and forget this business, plain and simple, short and
sweet, in the most practical fashion and without patting yourself on
the shoulder. But when it comes to you, with all the thousand facts
you know and argue about and demonstrate and dream of, you’re
clearly thinking you won’t do it. You have a nice sweet soul, you’ll
think it over, you’ll get all excited, you’ll feel sorry, you’ll think it over
again, and after all that you’ll go diving into a sea of deep thought
wondering, why didn’t I do it? And you’ll put the blame for missing
this opportunity, for never rounding off your existence, on the whole
wide world. It’s a crude and ugly world, you’ll say. So do something
instead. Do something, just this once. Stand up to it. Get out and
fight. Of course! (I do feel sorry for him. It’s a pity they chose me
for this job. I’d do it if I weren’t afraid of I don’t know what. If at
least we were alone here. The business is already thrilling and throbb-
ing in me like an unsatisfied appetite, yet still I can’t. I can’t begin.
It’s simply beyond me. When I remember that it will be necessary
to explain things; to come to people and argue, to prove myself, to
begin to justify myself—no, I simply can’t.)
Now listen lad, do you weigh all these miserable trills and tremolos against a human life? How would you like it if you were crouching on the floor of a Jeep, if your wife was waiting at home and everything was destroyed, flying about like chaff, lost and done for, waiting and waiting while the heart burns away and you’re not at home; waiting with tears, waiting with your fist, with humility, with prayer and protest...

He has already said all he has to say. He told us all he has to tell. And now what next? Even if he did lie, even if it was untrue seven times over, still, who and what is he more than a miserable nonentity, a withering submissive creature, a face wrapped around with a kerchief, all squeezed up and twisted, worthless, an empty frightened bag, fading away to nothing, abnegating himself, expecting to be kicked and regarding kicks as natural. (Take a kick at an Arab, it doesn’t mean anything to him.)

And you, his guard, you simply have to let him go even if he himself laughs at you, even if he or somebody else regards it as sheer incapacity, even if your companions mock you, even if they ask you to prevent his liberation, even if they send you to the Chief Prosecutor because of it, or to a score of prosecutors. It still remains your duty and you had better set about it and escape from this swinish routine. Then there’ll have been somebody who was prepared even if he paid for it to get out for once; to get away from the pigsties which rose so high and spread so far and wide while we were good citizens, and which have now officially and solemnly and by general agreement become the way of the world, the practice of everybody who wants to be worthy of the magnificent name of soldier.

We don’t get any leave, we can’t go home, it’s hot here, filthy here, miserable here, dangerous here—so what? Let’s take it out on the enemy. Let’s do something. Let’s knock off some miserable Arab. (Who asked him to start this damned war anyway?) Let’s permit ourselves to do everything we were once forbidden to do.

Ah well, here’s a certain Hassan Ahmad. His wife is either Halima or Fatma and he has two daughters and his flock has been stolen and he has been taken away somewhere or other on a bright and sunny afternoon. And who are you and what’s your life good for? All a fellow like you is worth is for having all the black bile inside us emptied out on you, and the hell with it.

Of course you’re not going to let him go. That’s perfectly plain. It’s just fine thoughts. It’s not even cowardice, it’s something worse. You’re a partner in the business, that’s what you are. Hiding behind that stinking “what’s to be done, it’s an order”, just this time when you have the choice and it’s all in your own power, in your very own hands.

The choice is yours. A great day it is. A day of revolt. A day when you have the choice in your own hands at last, and the power to turn it into a decision, to give life back to a misused man. Think it over. To act as your heart desires. In full accordance with your own love and your own truth, in accordance with the greatest of all things—the liberation of a man.

Let him go.

Be a man.

Let him go!

Well, it’s quite clear nothing will happen. Fly away, good idea. You’ll dodge, that’s plain. You’ll look the other way. Of course it’s all lost. I’m sorry for you, prisoner. He simply doesn’t have the strength to do it.

Yet maybe, in spite of everything? Right away, here and now. It would just take this moment. Pull up, driver. Get off, Hassan. Go home. Do something. Talk. Stop the Jeep. Say something now, this moment. After all your aching and bellyaching all these long and empty days, be a human being at last the way you want to be.

The fields were once vast shallow pinkish-gold expanse, all the tens of thousands of dunams made up one single enchanted plain without valleys, without hills, without activities or declivities, without villages or trees. Everything had been beaten down to one single gold foil, one leveled expanse above which were scattered quivering restless golden dust-blobs around a vast land of gold that stretched on to infinity; even if it were possible that on the other side (where nobody watches) amid the evening mists making their way down from
The Prisoner

the hills, even if there is some other sadness over there maybe, some misery, some misery of who knows what, some misery of shameful inaction, some waiting woman, some who-can-know-what decree of life, who knows what very very private individual, who knows what else that may be even more universal, which the setting sun is going to leave here, among us, never brought to an end?

Midnight Convoy

TRANSLATED BY REUVEN BEN-YOSEF
FIRST PUBLISHED IN 1959