

The Virtuous Ones

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Les Vertueux

A novel

Translation sample by Jane Bush

I

THE SKIN OF SALAMANDERS

The sun was preparing to disappear behind the mountain as, within sight of a group of mounted soldiers who approached the Big Kheïma, the servants bustled to return to their chores.

___ It's our master Gaïd Brahim returning from the hunting party, Babaï told me. Return to your room and stay there until someone comes to get you.

Night fell, and with it the pandemonium of the day. There was only the sound of soft steps in the darkness, accompanied by whispers. The dogs were no longer barking, no whinnying disturbed the quiet coming from the stalls.

Nose pressed against the windowpane I gazed outside. Candlelight flickered from the tents; here and there, spectral silhouettes went about their business, lanterns in hand.

Someone brought me a meal: slices of roasted meat served on a plate laid with lettuce leaves and garnished with slices of red onion, fresh bread from the communal oven, a plateful of couscous dripping with honey, and succulent fruit. I devoured everything. I didn't think I was capable of such gorging, but it was the only way I had found to steady my nerves. I was uncomfortable with this excessive consideration and generosity. It was too nice to not arouse a million disturbing questions within me.

Someone came to clear the dishes. In silence. The dishes disappeared without a clatter; clean placemats covered the table. No one said a word to me.

The moment I considered going to bed, a servant summoned me to follow him. He led me along a long corridor, had me climb a staircase, pushed me into a large room and withdrew.

I waited, standing in the middle of some padded banquettes, between a stuffed gazelle and an embroidered saddle. On either side of the window stood a pendulum clock in its wooden armor and an enormous samovar with handles wrapped in a leopard skin.

Gaïd Brahim emerged from a back door. He was tall, broad shouldered, with eyes lined in kohl and a beard trimmed with care. I imagined him to be older, cantankerous, and violent; I was mistaken. The man was young, hardly fifty years old, with a healthy appearance and a welcoming smile. He was wearing a silk robe with braided sleeves belted with a thick red sash, immaculate Turkish pants, and imposing rings on his

fingers. He was not very handsome, but he sported a certain charm which was clearly attributable to his charisma as master.

___ Have you eaten?

I acquiesced.

___ Good.... continuing to look at me. Your room pleases you?

___ Yes, *sidi*.

___ Good.

He approached me. His perfume almost overwhelmed me. He rested his pale hands on my shoulders; I had the feeling that he was pushing my body down a notch.

He looked more deeply into my face.

___ Are you being well cared for?

___ Yes, *sidi*.

He pushed me gently towards a sort of throne covered in costly fabric.

___ Do I frighten you?

___ No, *sidi*.

___ So, stand up straight.

He installed himself comfortably on his throne, placed his arms on the armrests in the manner of a khan looking down over his court, and went back to staring at me.

___ Do you know why I called for you?

___ No, *sidi*.

___ No one knows why you are here. And no one needs to know. My servants are surely asking a lot of questions about you. They won't know anything. What unites us this evening, in this room, will stay in this room. It will be our secret. Have I made myself understood?

___ Yes, *sidi*.

___ Let's see you repeat what I just told you.

___ What unites us this evening, in this room, will stay in this room.

___ Is it a secret?

___ Word of honor, *sidi*.

___ Not really. A secret is more than that. It's an oath that nothing can break.

___ Good. You must also have a lot of questions, right?

I did not answer, out of caution.

___ It's your right to ask what you are doing here, in the middle of the night, in a private conversation with the caïd who only grants this privilege to important people and courtesans. With a finger he motioned me to come closer to the dais where the throne stood.

___ You are here because you deserve it. You are one of the rare young men of my domain who knows how to read and write. If I had been aware of it sooner, I would have sent you to college. They do not accept Muslim children, but there are exceptions. (He stroked his beard, cornering me with his look, watchful of what might cross my mind.) Your merit doesn't stop there. Above all, you possess a quality that others don't have: a nobility of the soul. If Providence did not deign for you to have been born under a Big Tent, it hasn't stopped you from embodying its virtues. And you are virtuous, Yacine, son of Sallam. You are brave, honest, and obedient. A true father's son. A true father's son is recognized by the love he nurtures for his family, for his tribe, and for his nation. I know that you will not hesitate to sacrifice yourself for your family.

I lowered my head, confused.

He rested his chin in the palm of his hand, appearing to reflect, turned towards the portraits of two patriarchs hanging on the wall between two engraved and ornamented scimitars, then towards the embroidered saddle, returning to me:

___ I reign over all kinds of people, and I have learned to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. My status requires it. A ruler must not leave anything to chance. His distrust is his talisman. You never know whom you are dealing with, what mortal bite lurks behind the smile, or what trapdoor was dug under your feet by the person unrolling the carpet. But I do not only see the bad side of things. Suspicion is not always a good advisor. Eventually, you will end up facing yourself all alone. I know there are loyal people who are ready to die for me. And I am persuaded that you are one of them.

___ I have always been loyal, *sidi*.

He showed me the portraits of the patriarchs – two austere old men posing for posterity, the brow resolute, and the chest covered with medals.

___ On the left, my grandfather, he said with pride. Gaïd Ammar Boussaïd, dead at the age of ninety-three. He fought in the Crimean War, at the other end of the world, and led the famous Turcos right up to the gates of Sevastopol without ever retreating in battle. On the right, my father, Gaïd Saadedine Boussaïd. The first Muslim to receive the Legion of Honor. It's the French Emperor, Napoleon III, who delivered it to him personally. The other medals, he got them on the field of battle during the War of 1870... Each time that I raise my eyes upon these two paintings, I regret that I was just a brat while my valiant descendent assaulted the citadels and stampeded enemy ranks. I had hoped, when I was twenty, that a conflict would ignite somewhere where I too could carve my tale by the sword into the flesh of my adversaries. Destiny decided otherwise. And who can force destiny?

Finally, he invited me to sit on a pouf at the foot of the dais.

___ Honor, my boy, is that which differentiates human beings from animals. While the lion may roar and shake its mane in the wind, his rule will know neither glory nor stele. In the bush, or in captivity, a beast lives and dies a beast. But a hero, even dead, continues to be a hero. The moment his corpse is entrusted to the ground, his soul takes possession of the mind to shape memories and inspire entire generations. Am I wrong to believe this?

___ No, *sidi*, I stammered, my throat dry.

The caïd's look fell upon my shoulders like a straitjacket.

___ A man without honor is to be pitied more than the scarecrow planted in the fields. His life is a muddle, without a tail or a head. No one will come to place flowers on his grave. It will be as if he never existed.

He poured himself something to drink, holding the goblet in his hand for a long time before placing it back on the small table which separated the pouf I was sitting upon from the throne which towered above me.

___ It's because of this that I am living a real-life tragedy since I learned that my heir, the future caïd of the Beni Boussaïd Ech-Chorafas, was declared unfit by the army's medical board.

He pounded on the armrest, making me jump.

___ My own son, the son of Gaïd Brahim, unable to wear the uniform of warriors and to brandish his sword, bellowing above the enemy. (With an angry motion, he wiped the froth from the corners of his mouth.) My ancestors must have rolled over in their graves, and I, I cannot close my eyes at night....

He joined his fingers under his chin, shaking his head, outraged.

He continued:

___ There is no greater insult, for a Boussaïd, than to see the perfect opportunity to strengthen his family legend vanish beneath his nose. Of all the opportunities, the best, the most prestigious, and the most undisputable is that which war offers. While beggars, without instruction or swagger, are recruited by the millions, my own son, flesh of my flesh, the most noble of all nobles, has been declared unfit for military service. Discharged! he cursed, his mouth twisted. Like people with tuberculosis, like the disabled, like simpletons! He, who has been called upon to reign over the four tribes who live on my land! What authority would he have left if his character was demythologized by a common medical board?

He shook his head, his jaws clenched. Once again, his fist struck the armrest forcefully.

___ I have decided that it will not be like this. The banner of the Boussaïds will never cease to fly over the guns. My son has a heart ailment, but he is alive. He is of sound mind and has no reason to bow to the first person who presents himself. Do you see anyone?

___ No, *sidi*.

___ It's a question of principal. I promised my father, on his death bed, that the reputation of the Boussaïds will not lose face, neither before the blow dealt by fate, nor before the plan is completed... I went to complain to the authorities, and I won my case, he added, brandishing a sheet of paper. My son has been called up to rejoin the ranks of the brave.

I no longer followed him.

He noticed that I had hardly swallowed anything and ordered me to drink. I grabbed the carafe and emptied half of it.

___ Are you feeling better now?

___ Yes, *sidi*.

___ Are you absorbing everything I am trying to tell you?

___ Yes, *sidi*.

___ I would expect nothing less of you. Someone assured me that you were a reliable and intelligent young man, and I am pleased to confirm this myself. You want something else? A tea, or else an orangeade?

___ No, *sidi*.

___ Good, let's return to our conversation. So, I said that there was no question, for the Boussaïds, to not take part in the war which was just declared in Europe. Many Muslims have been called up to defend the honor of France. Spahi and sharp-shooter units are already at the front. My son will soon fight by their sides. For all the gold in the world, the Boussaïds would never miss such a meeting with History.

___ Are you not worried that your son has complications with his health, *sidi*? If the army discharged him, it's for his own good. I don't know why I am here, but if you want my opinion, I find that it's not a good idea to send your son to war with a bad heart.

There was a long silence.

The caïd looked at me as if I had just blasphemed. Had I offended by interrupting him? Had I committed a breach of oath by giving my opinion, I, who was not supposed to have one?

My throat started hurting me again, but I didn't have the courage to pour something to drink. My limbs were stiff; I had difficulty breathing.

Suddenly, he pointed his finger at me with authority:

___ It's you who is going to go in his place, he announced with an assertive tone. You will take his name, Hamza Boussaïd, and you will endeavor to be worthy of it.

For a minute everything became confused in my head, and I was no longer certain I understood the caïd's proposal. The words suddenly ceased to have any meaning in my mind. Until this point, I had listened to Gaïd Brahim as I had listened, in the old days, to the troubadours, vying with one another, embellish the exploits of their heroes. To me, the caïd was telling a story. If I was tense, it was because I was afraid I didn't know how to put things in context. The emperor of the French, the epic stories, the countries at war that he had mentioned and which I had never heard of, the Turcos, whom the story tellers made out to be demi-gods in order to amaze the kids that we were, the glory of the Boussaïds, all these grandiloquent references were enhanced by the folklore of the souks, in my opinion. Suddenly, what I found difficult to understand, and wasn't connecting to, coalesced for little me without warning, just like that, in the roundabout way of a conversation which I was a million miles away from suspecting concerned me. It felt like a sudden gust of wind slammed a shutter in my face.

___ You would like me to go to war in place of your son, *sidi*? I heard myself stammer.

___ Absolutely. The Boussaïd name must appear in the history books. It's imperative. My son wants to go, despite his failing heart. It's very courageous of him, but he wouldn't last an hour on a horse. It has been difficult dissuading him. He is terribly upset now. He doesn't eat, doesn't sleep, or want anyone around him. He blames himself for being unwell, and he has broken his mirrors so that he cannot look at himself. But courage is one thing, and health another. God only gives us what we can handle. My son does not have the strength to brandish his sword while bellowing above the enemy. The slightest effort gets him out of breath. That is why I have decided to send someone strong in his place. I have searched among the brave young men of the four tribes. Not one comes close to you.

___ But I am not yet old enough for the army.

___ That's what is written on paper. Actually, your parent waited three years after your birth to register you at the registry office. Some fathers do the same thing. They think that this way their offspring will be more mature and better prepared the day of their induction, which is, in one sense, quite relevant... But, be assured, I am not a monster to send a boy to the front. And you are far from being a boy. You are right in time, Yacine, son of Sallam. You are twenty-something.

And to say that this was a secret between my parents and me.

People were not exaggerating when they said that Gaïd Brahim saw through our eyes and listened with our ears, that he was aware of everything that happened in his domain, and that he was even capable of guessing the sex of the fetus in a mother's stomach.

I was too dehydrated to wait for permission to take possession of the carafe. The caïd considered me while I quenched my thirst before drowning the fire which rose up within me. His eyes seemed to take hold of my body and my soul, like two demonic beings.

___ You are quite pale. Is something wrong?

___ I...I do not understand, *sidi*.

___ What don't you understand? Yet it's clear. I am offering you the chance of your life. How many chances have you had, so far? Not one. Your present looks like your past. You get up in the morning and you die at night, and so on, until someone tosses shovelfuls of earth on your corpse at the bottom of the grave. Is that what you want? To be no more than a shadow on a pebble? ... I am not going to hold a knife against your throat. I am giving you the time to realize what an immense privilege I am granting you.

All the water I had just drunk gushed out of my pores, cold and stinging.

The words which escaped from my guts had trouble reaching my lips.

___ I... I can't do it, *sidi*.

___ You can't do what?

___ It's that...I am not ready.

___ Who is, really? No one knows what will happen one hour from now, my boy.

___ Excuse me, *sidi*. I am very confused...The army, for me, is in two or three years' time. I hadn't even thought of it. And then, there is my family. My father is disabled. He needs me.

___ Your family will lack nothing.

I was trapped.

___ My parents were considering marriage for me this summer, I lied.

___ With whom?

___ They have not put forward any names.

___ You see? You are ready to accept getting married, eyes closed, to a girl you do not know, to the detriment of a cause that would increase your self-esteem and the respect of others. A marriage can wait, but he who passes up the opportunity of his life will never get it back again. What could she give you, a wife? Additional mouths to feed, and worries. When someone is poor, he cannot see beyond the tip of his nose, because he's assumed to be automatically disqualified, deprived of dreams and ambition. But that's not true. In the Koran, it is written that God will improve the conditions of a community only when this community has had a change of mentality. And you must change yours if you aspire to have a better life, my boy.

___ It's not that, *sidi*.

___ What is it otherwise? Unless you are afraid of confronting it. Would you be this coward that I didn't detect earlier? I would be sorry to allow a wimp to occupy the pouf upon which you are seated. Are you a wimp, Yacine, son of Sallam?

___ No, *sidi*.

___ Then why are you trembling like a girl?

___ I'm cold.

___ No, you're not cold. You don't have any guts, and you disappoint me.

He cracked his knuckles:

___ I know people who would sell their souls to be in your place. What do you hope to change in your life when you go back to your slum? In any case, you will be called up to join the military service, one day or other. Your time will come, but there won't be anything to offer you. Which is not the case this evening. I am offering you the opportunity to change the course of your destiny. The war will not last long. Perhaps it will be over before your regiment reaches the front. When you return, you will be celebrated as a hero. I will treat you as my own son. You will have land where your family will live in comfort. I will marry you to the most beautiful virgin in the region. You will walk with your head held high among important people. Everything that you have wanted, everything that you have dreamed of, you will have only to snap your fingers to get.

He left his throne and came to place his hand on my shoulder.

___ You are not obliged to answer me right away. I will let you go back to the room which has been prepared for you. Only try not to sleep soundly. The fate of your family depends on you. You have to weigh the good and the bad. If you agree to my offer, that's fine. You will definitively turn your back on misery. On the other hand, if my proposition doesn't suit you, I want you to disappear from my sight before dawn. You will return to your douar and tell your mother and father to gather their offspring and their bundles and leave my estate without delay. I do not need to warn you that they will not find a place to stay anywhere. As for you, you will no longer be worthy of keeping our secret...and I will not run the risk that our little interview will be divulged, if you see what I mean.

He tapped me on the cheek.

___ It's up to you to decide, my boy: glory and fortune, or wandering and hardship for your family.

I quickly understood that I would make a decision that would not be mine, because while God sometimes closed his eyes to the sins of his saints, the caïd kept his open wide like an abyss under the feet of his subjects.