

WHAT HAPPENED TO MUḤAMMAD AL-MAḤMŪDĪ —
A SUMMARY

A Short Story by the Syrian author Zakariyyā Tāmīr

Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī was an old man, who lived alone in a small house, with no wife and no child. After his retirement he had nothing to do. As soon as morning came he would leave the house and walk down the street with unhurried steps, stopping for a moment to buy his favourite newspaper, only to continue walking, slowly, heading for the café, which had nothing more than a glass wall separating it from the noisy street. Reaching it, he would go inside and make his way to a particular table from which he looked out onto the street. Without speaking, he would sit down, waiting for his water-pipe and cup of coffee without sugar. Then he would take his spectacles from his pocket, put them on and become engrossed in reading the paper, smoking the pipe meanwhile and from time to time glancing up at the street with a far-away look in his eyes.

When he grew hungry, he would get up heavily and regretfully, quitting the café for a nearby restaurant. He ate in boredom, then returned quickly to the café to continue reading the newspaper, smoking the waterpipe, sipping his tea or coffee and watching the street until night fell and darkness prevailed. Only then did he leave the café and go home to his house, take off his clothes, lie down on his wide bed and immediately surrender to deep sleep.

Sometimes he would see his mother in his dreams, scolding him sharply for never having married, and screaming for a child to say to her: "Granny—buy me a balloon!"

He would wake from his sleep depressed and ashamed of his desire for a good cry.

One day he was sitting in the café as usual, reading the newspaper and smoking the water-pipe, when suddenly the paper slipped from his fingers, he gave a sigh and collapsed, motionless, onto the floor. The doctor was hurriedly sent for, and he confidently affirmed that al-Maḥmūdī was dead. Then the picks and shovels came to implement his will, and they dug a hole underneath the table at which he used to sit. Gently he was carried and laid at the bottom of the hole and heaps of earth were piled over him. He did not get angry nor did he complain, but smiled happily to be rid of walking the streets and going to the house and the restaurant. He listened with affection to the conversations of the

customers in the café, to the bubbling of the water-pipes and the shouts of the waiter. Yet at night, when the café was deserted and had closed its doors, he would experience boredom, loneliness and fear.

A day came when a number of policemen stormed the café, dug out Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī from his hole and led him away to one of the police stations. There the superintendent said to him sharply: "It has been reported to us that you have been criticising the actions of the government, that you have ridiculed it and abused it and that you claim that all its laws serve only those who own buildings and cars and have large stomachs."

Frightened, Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī cried out, protesting: "I? Abuse the government? May God protect me! I am not one of those who drink from a spring and then spit in it. Ask about me. I was a model employee—I used to obey instructions and the laws and carry them out meticulously. Just ask about me. I never drank; I never molested a woman; I never hurt anyone; I was ..."

The officer interrupted him, saying: "But the reports which come to us concerning you do not lie, and those who write them are utterly trustworthy."

Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī trembled and said in a shaky voice: "I swear by God that I have lived my whole life without ever once talking politics. In all my born days I have never abused either the government or the rulers."

The officer said: "Ah! You have condemned yourself with your own mouth! You have said that you did not abuse the government, but you did not say that you praised it—does it not deserve praise, in your opinion?"

Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī tried to speak, but the officer continued: "Even if what you say is true, that itself is very strange—for everybody has become corrupt and full of hatred and revenge; they abuse the government and the rulers, forgetting their duty to obey those in charge, and that politics has its own people."

In a weak voice Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī said: "That's true. Everyone talks politics, and they can't leave a state official without applying the most atrocious attributes to him. But I ..."

The officer interrupted, his voice gentle and inquiring: "And you, in the café you hear, of course, what they are saying, and you know the names of those speaking?"

Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī nodded his head, and the officer smiled and said: "It seems that you are a kind-hearted man and a good citizen. I would really like to help you, so that you may escape the charge that has been brought against you. But you have to help me too."

Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī said in amazement: "But how can I help you?—I'm dead!"

The officer laughed merrily and said: "The matter is very simple and amusing. Listen ..."

Muḥammad al-Maḥmūdī listened to what the officer said, and then after a short while he returned to his hole in the café—very cheerful, for he now had something to do. No longer did he feel lonely, bored or afraid when the café closed its doors at midnight, for he would then rush to write down what he had heard from the customers in the café, careful not to forget anything.

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