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HASSAN

My first morning in Beirut, Lebanon. It was hot, hot. From the cool terrace of my hotel into the blinding sunlight. «Taxi, Sir, taxi?» «Chewing-gum?» «Shoe-shine?» There they all were, and the usual pimps, one more insistent than the rest, a youth in a blue nylon shirt, worn over his pants. «You come with me? I show you. What you want? Nice girl, very clean, 16-years-old? You want boy, young boy?».

«Clear off», I told him, but nylon shirt followed me, half a pace behind. «You want something? I help you. What you want?» «I don't want anything» was my firm response, «go away.» Nylon shirt followed me — where did I want to go? He would help me. I stopped at the branch post-office in the Avenue des Français to buy stamps, post letters. He was there, beside me. The paper shop, to get the daily newspapers. He was there. To Cooks to see if there was any mail. He was there. He followed me back to the hotel, always a little behind. I became conscious of the wad of notes in the back pocket of my trousers — these Arabs have a reputation for being light-fingered I had intended to stop out longer, to savour the atmosphere of this colourful, chaotic city ... but I had to escape somehow, so returned to my hotel.

Next morning, same thing — blue nylon shirt — following always one pace behind. «You want something? I help you. Where you want to go?» Post-office, paper shop, Wagons-Lit Cooks, and back to the hotel. The youth followed me. On the third morning I decided to put a stop to this nonsense. «Get away from me,» I shouted, in exasperation, «get out, or I'll call the police!» «Okay!» Like a whipped puppy, he slunk away, shoulders drooping. He looked so very slight and young, and as he turned I thought — or could it have been imagination — that I saw tears in his eyes — his brilliant black eyes. Slowly he walked in the opposite direction. He didn't look back. And I continued on my way. How strange that I should actually miss these quiet footsteps just behind me — out for what he can get, a street boy. But that stricken look when I had shouted at him. Poor kid! But why poor kid? wasn't he a ... why get sentimental over a pimp. Oh hell — but he haunted me all that day. Somehow the joy had gone out of everything. Come what may, I must see him again. Hassan, didn't he tell me his name was? An orphan. Living with his aunt and uncle. I now recalled much that he had spoken into my unwilling, unreceptive ear. How morbid and sentimental can you get! I returned to my hotel. To-morrow he'd be there right enough.

But, next day, not a sign of the blue nylon shirt. I spent a miserable day, and the night was not fun either. Next day I started looking for him. He had gone off in this direction — up this street. But the search was fruitless. Sitting drinking at a pavement cafe (he might come along this way), I stayed longer than I had intended. The sun was setting. And then suddenly I caught sight of him. Walking slowly, shoulders drooping a little he would soon be level with my table. He had seen me, of that I was sure, but he gave no sign, was passing by ... «Hassan!» I called. He continued on his way. «Hassan!» I shouted. Now he turned. «Does the Effendi want something from me?» he asked, despondently. «Yes — no — Hassan, please come and sit down — have a drink!» Hesitantly he came up to my table, sat down, said he would have a beer. We clinked glasses, Hassan taking care to touch his glass lower than mine, an Arabic sign of respect. He looked at me with distrust in his eyes.

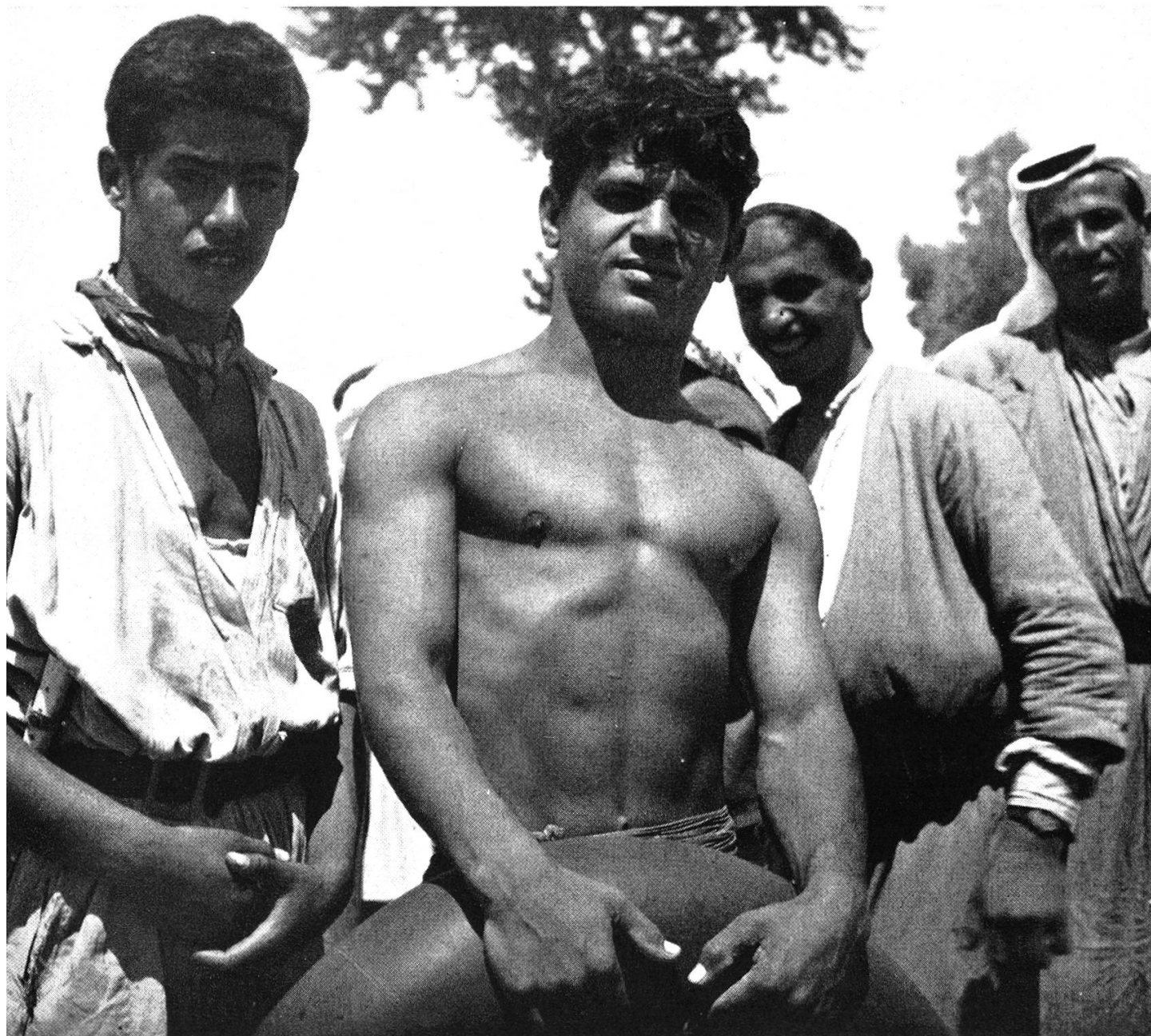


Photo: Italie

Jeunes arabes



«What do you want of me?» he murmured. «I want... your company,» I replied, «I want to say I am sorry for shouting at you the other day...» And suddenly the youngster turned on me such a sweet smile that my heart melted. Another drink, and by now the sun had just set — the dramatic moment in Mediterranean countries, the cool breeze, the sea of pale blue glass. Hassan took my hand — in that special intimate clasp the Arabs have, and we crossed the road to the promenade, and there, by a clump of palm trees, we halted. He pressed my hand and then unloosed it and with a quick movement he swung round and reaching up, put his arms round my neck and kissed me on the mouth. Passionate — tender? Thus we stood, regardless of passers-by. «I die for you», he kept repeating, «I die for you!» We followed the sea wall, arm in arm, pressed close, and talked long into the night. What did we say? I cannot recall, except that at one point I realized I had forgotten to take my watch with me. «What's the time?», I asked (I remembered the gaudy wrist watch he had worn when I first met him) «I do not know», he told me. «And your watch?» There was a brief pause. Then: «That watch was not mine», he told me, gravely, «I had to give it back — I — I stole it. You see I tell you the truth. I am a thief.» I looked at him — his head was bent, shoulders drooped. I pressed him closer to me, and we walked on. «I know,» he said at length, «what you are thinking. Yes, I was going to rob you. I saw the money in your back pocket... it would have been easy... and the next day you had your money in your wallet in the inside pocket — a very dangerous place to carry money, but...» «Well?» «Somehow I could not. I wanted to have you for... a friend.» «I am your friend,» I told him, «if you want me» A signal for just one more embrace, and another, and just one more...

«To-morrow,» he said, as we parted, «I get nice apartment — much much cheaper than your hotel — I shall go to market in the mornings, I shall cook for you, and at nights I shall... love you, yes?»

Oh Hassan, yes, yes!

The apartment Hassan found was one of the ugliest I had ever seen. Drab browns and greens, stiff chairs in the Salon, a large double bed in the bedroom covered with faded chenille... but Hassan was so enchanted, eyes glistening, that I hadn't the heart to do anything but take it on the spot. When all was settled and the landlady had handed over the keys of the little ugly flat, and departed, the boy drew me to him. «Our home!» he breathed.

(It is still «our home», but we have improved it a little — new covers, curtains, flowers from the nearby market...)

Hassan helped me to move in and then said he was going to get his box. I suggested he might need a taxi, but he told me the box was not heavy. I said I would come with him, for I was secretly curious to see this uncle and aunt. «No, no, Effendi, you here — I will not be long.» «But I'd like a walk,» I told him. Very well, so we set out. We had only gone two hundred yards down a rather shabby street when he stopped in front of a small, modest bar — almost a hole-in-the-wall. «It is here,» he said, and we went in. He said something in Arabic to the man behind the counter, who handed him a cardboard box. (This little box, I found later, contained all his pathetic possessions).

«So, that was your uncle,» I said, as we left. On the pavement outside, Hassan stopped. «Effendi,» he said gravely, «I have lied to you. That was not my uncle — he lives in a village far away in the mountains. The man there

was good to me — he let me sleep there after they closed at night. For this I would sweep out the place in the morning. Now you know all.»

I don't think Hassan has ever lied to me again.

I have tried, so far as is possible, to establish a father-son relationship, though I sometimes wonder which is the father and which the son! Hassan has taken complete charge of me; he is fiercely jealous, fiercely protective (he assures me he knows how to use the small dagger he always carries in his belt), gets up very early to go to market and bargains over each item. Like a demon he sweeps, washes, irons, does the cooking — even sews on buttons and mends my clothes. And he will not allow me to be extravagant. «Why we take taxi? Come, the tram is only here.»

One day, when Hassan was out shopping, I bought myself some sunglasses. When he returned he asked me «How much you paid for those?» I told him. «Where you buy them?» I told him, whereupon he snatched up the glasses and dashed out. In two minutes he was back and handed me, in triumph, the glasses and two Lebanese lire. «You see! They rob you!»

The days passed happily. Hassan knew of a secluded beach where we used to bathe in the mornings (he would not allow me to pay for a «cabine» at the bathing establishment in town), then lunch, siesta, out for drinks in the cool of the evening, perhaps a cinema or a stroll after dinner. At night he slept in my arms, or I in his. I liked to think I made up a little for the affection and love he had never known and needed so badly.

One evening I returned from a cocktail party — it was after we had been in the apartment some two weeks — and was surprised to find the place empty. Perhaps Hassan had gone out shopping. Yet the flat seemed strangely desolate. Then I saw the note, written in Hassan's jerky, painstaking writing. «I take all your money,» I read, «I go, I never come back. I thank you from my heart for all. Do not try find me. I am bad and stupid. I love you with all my heart, always. Your stupid Hassan.»

What did he mean? For a moment I was stunned. And «all» my money? But — I opened my wallet — yes, I had money on me. Then I remembered the 500 Lebanese lire I had kept in reserve and tucked away in the back of a drawer. How had he known...? Anyway, the money was gone, never mind. But why the word «stupid,» repeated twice? I thought back... That morning I had sent him for stamps and he had returned with the wrong amount and denomination. «How stupid of you,» I had said, casually, and he got up without a word and went back to change them. Come to think of it, he had been a little silent. Complained of a headache. (I have since learned that you can call an Arab almost anything, but not stupid. It is a grave offense).

And there on the table was the rolled-gold watch I had given him — he had chosen it himself. Beside it, carefully folded, was a tie and a shirt — also little presents from me. But he had taken his cardboard box. Was this, then, the end? I felt... I don't know, something like misery and panic combined. I sat down in the one comfortable chair and tried to think. What to do? No use searching for him in the Labyrinthian streets of Beirut.

I sat there for hours — or was it only minutes? — in utter dejection. I hadn't the heart to do anything. At last I made myself pour out a drink (How Hassan liked to pour my drinks for me) turn on the radio (Hassan had loved that radio), then taking up a book I tried to read. I was sitting there, in the background soft music (to which I did not listen), in my hand a book (which

I was not reading), when suddenly the front door burst open. Hassan! He came forward into the room and without a word took from his pocket a bundle of notes and some coins. He counted the money in front of me. There were the five-hundred lire intact, all but a few piastres. He was wearing the old blue nylon shirt, I noticed. And he kept his eyes averted, would not look at me. I could see that he was in great distress, and trembling. «Hassan,» I said, softly, «look at me!»

He raised his eyes, in which tears glistened, and suddenly he knelt before me, buried his head on my knee and sobbed. I let him cry for a while, stroking the dark head. Then I lifted him in my arms like a child, and in a little while he was quieter. My relief was so great that I could hardly speak. «Hassan?» I questioned at last. «I had to see you, I had to come back,» he whispered. «Will you send me away, Effendi? If you say so, I will go...» Oh Hassan, Hassan!

⋆

Yes, yes, I'm coming to bed, just let me finish... no, don't do that! (It is Hassan standing by me, wearing nothing but a wrist watch, and nibbling at my ear) — well, just one, then. There! No, don't bite my cheek... all right then, I give up, you win!

M.M.W.

Book-Review

BLANKET BOY; by Peter Lanham and A. S. Mopeli-Paulus; Crowell, N.Y., 1953

Blanket Boy is a richly detailed novel by an Englishman in collaboration with a Basuto chieftain. It has lots of plot, many characters, moves all over South Africa. It has some of the qualities of a picaresque novel. It is also a propaganda novel — and by that I do not mean that it is dishonest but only that it has a social message and purpose. It is the story of a South African Negro — «a comely young man in his middle twenties of strong build and graceful carriage» — with one foot in the primitive culture of his own people and the other in the white man's world, unable to shake free of the old or to assimilate the new, and subjected as all his fellow Negroes are, to appalling injustices, brutalities and stupidities by the ruthless white rulers of his homeland. *Blanket Boy* gives a far more detailed picture of the life of the South African Negro than Alan Paton's celebrated *Cry the Beloved Country*. And although it is filled with terrible events and ends tragically, it is a colorful, singing, high-hearted book.

So grave, so many and so interlocked are the problems with which this novel deals that it seems scarcely decent to isolate its homosexual content and to dwell exclusively upon that aspect of it. I believe that *Blanket Boy* is of special interest to our readers, however, because its hero is actively bisexual and the novel provides considerable insight into the social conditions which make him so, as well as insight into the way he thinks and feels about his sexual relations.

This book appeared four years ago, and since it seems a little late in the day to be reviewing it, I shall attempt to give the reader some idea of how Monare, the Blanket Boy, happened to do his loving the way he did.