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BOULAI D DOUDOU, ALGERIAN WRITER AND SCHOLAR

Who in Vienna, except for some personal friends, would know that one of the best writers in the Arabic language of the younger generation, Boulaïd Doudou, lived in our city for about a decade and received his degree as a Doctor of Philosophy here? For several years, I had the pleasure of being Boulaïd Doudou's student and colleague at the Oriental Institute of the University of Vienna; our friendship, though naturally reduced to occasional contacts, still continues – now that Doudou has left Austria and gone back to Algeria, his native country.

Generously supported at the beginning by an uncle, Boulaïd Doudou, who stems from a country family, studied at the Universities of Constantine, Tunis, Baghdad and Vienna, where he finished his studies in the early sixties; after having worked as a teacher of Arabic in Vienna and Kiel, he accepted a call to the University of Algiers where he now holds a chair as a Professor of Comparative Literature and, at the same time, is very successfully indulging in his literary activities – stories, theatre- and TV-plays, translations.

Doudou, a great partisan of using Arabic rather than French as the literary language of his country, has nevertheless an excellent knowledge of foreign languages; he has read much more of world's literature than most of the people I know.

I met Doudou recently in Rome, in the house of mutual friends; he was on the way back from an Algerian Cultural Week held in Iraq – back to Algiers where he lives with his wife from Vorarlberg and his three children.

*Patriotism in the world's best sense plays a dominant role in Doudou's works which represent people and landscape of his beloved country to an ever increasing readership. The following story "The Shadow" (taken from the collection of stories *Dar al-Thalatha*, Algiers, 1971), which I have translated in a slightly shortened version, reflects a scene from the Algerian resistance to colonialism: it is based on a real event experienced personally by Doudou's brother, shoemaker in life and in the story.*

BOULAID DOUDOU

THE SHADOW

January 11, 1961

It was a morning bathed in sunlight, extremely beautiful in its glare. The sky was clear and blue and seemed to tremble behind the golden filaments of the sun. The sea was breathing calmly and gently spitting out its foam. At noon, belts of silvery whiteness appeared on the horizon and started embracing each other as if they had come to an appointment ...

Al-Zubair was stepping towards "Belle Cour", his heart thumping wildly. When, on completing his job, he left the building, he thought he saw a shadow hiding behind a corner in the street. He walked down the stairs, began to run, but the thing had vanished. He entered the main street, took the third street to the left, turning round every now and then, stopped near a door and waited for some seconds. But since he did not notice anything unusual he calmed down and walked on.

He was pondering about Khalifa. Would he find him in the store? Would he also have finished his last task? ... There were the "Brethren", waiting for the money ... life went on, so their work had to go on too. Certain circumstances had been the reason why both of them had been delayed - more than was necessary. And, suddenly: this Shadow, had it been a real thing or just a product of his imagination? And had it also obtruded on Khalifa?

Only some days ago, they had lost some of their brethren, owing to the Shadow. Since then both of them knew that this despicable Shadow was watching their steps in the streets, cafés, buildings, quarters of the capital ... everywhere. It was breathing the same air as they, had three eyes, a blind one worshipping everything mean and vile, and two seeing ones which noticed everything noble and precious in order to stain it ... to denounce it. But these two eyes looked innocent, hiding all their meanness, their servility. The Shadow had no heart, no mind, no manliness - and no patriotic feelings.

It was this thought which made Al-Zubair instinctively look for his revolver and turn round again ... then he moved towards the store where he and Khalifa had been hiding for the last week ... since they had been able to get rid of the Shadow. They had made use of the time gained by this to fulfil their tasks in the capital ...

It had been their intention to leave the Shadow on that day and to return to the brethren in order to bring the mission to a successful end ...

He entered a shoemaker's shop in that street, opposite the store whose door was locked. The owner was not alone, but he did not mind. He just said:

"Give me shelter."

The shoemaker looked up, startled, surprised. He had not seen him before. But then he remembered a young man visiting him in the morning, who had asked him to remove a nail in the front part of his shoe; he had been troubled by it. When he put his hand in, he found a little piece of paper which he dropped into a drawer in front of him. Then he had feigned repairing the shoe (there were some people present). Then he had returned the shoe to its owner who left immediately afterwards. This flash of memory made the shoemaker stretch out his hand and say to Al-Zubair, smiling:

"I'll give you shelter, God may help you!"

Al-Zubair smiled back; he knew all about the love, kindness and sincerity in this smile. Opening the door he entered. The store was rather dark and cold, with its rear part rising towards an elevated terrace and a square pillar in the centre. To the left, a door led to the neighbouring room, which, in turn, was equipped with a rusty iron door towards the street.

He sat down to go through some papers and to throw away those which were no longer of use. Suddenly, somebody fired, once, twice, three times. Rapid steps. Jumping up, looking through the half-opened door, he saw Khalifa approaching from the main street ... running as fast as possible, revolver in hand. No, the Shadow was not imagination. At the door, Khalifa stammered:

"They have betrayed us, we must flee ... the Shadow has found out about us, their camp is not far away from us!"

Both of them seized their machine guns and put them under their coats. Then they went out into the street. Rough voices from here and there: "Stop!" In a second they were back in the store; Khalifa said:

"The enemy is besieging us!"

"What of it?"

Al-Zubair climbed on the roof. He chose his place and said:

"From here I can fire very well, you just try to stay behind the pillar!"

Voices, steps, becoming louder, closer. They got their machine guns and hand grenades ready. There was no escape from the battle: two against a large number ... But one thing gave them confidence: capitulation is difficult for somebody under the Country's spell, the Country whose plains and summits are rising and growing in his conscience ...

"Come out! There is no hope of rescue!"

Shots from inside followed, piercing the door which trembled violently. A satisfactory answer. Then the "Shadow"'s voice rose; it seemed rather familiar to Al-Zubair although he did not know to whom it belonged:

"Listen, Al-Zubair, we know that you are here, come out ... come out, damned be your grandfather!"

"My grandfather can't be damned since he has left behind grandsons fighting for the defence of their country!"

"If you are a free man, come out!"

"I shall be free as long as I am here, you dirty slave! You have given up and they have washed your brain ... then they have made you come here to tell me about freedom! But I have sworn to die for my country!"

Meanwhile a small soldier had tried to enter through the door of the adjacent room, Khalifa fired and hit his hand. Running away and trying to wipe off his blood at the wall, the man was on the point of crying:

"He has nearly killed me, the son of a ..."

He started swearing while the Shadow approached his mouth to the door:

"The Commander asks you to come out and promises that nothing will happen to you".

Khalifa, behind the pillar, had a feeling that the voice was just in front of the door. He directed his machine gun that way. A sequence of shots. Outside the Commander fell, and some soldiers came running to carry him away, while others hurried to the opposite side and set up a machine-gun. On both sides, firing went on, roaringly. An old woman popped her head out, above the store:

"Kill the terrorists! Kill them! Or we shall never have peace with them!"

She vanished, and some loud music started above the iron door, rising above the noise of the bullets. The door trembled under the impact of the projectiles; it even rose a bit from the ground. Khalifa was sitting on a basket behind the pillar, Al-Zubair close to the door. They fired when they saw somebody through the holes made by the bullets in the door. The battle had been going on for the past one and a half hours, but the Shadow did not give up hope:

"Come out, Zubair! Give it up!"

"Have you forgotten that death is easier for us?"

"Don't you want to see your family? You really might upset them! Look, soon it will be night."

"The night has its stars, you rogue. You are only speaking to us to know whether we are still alive. Yes, we are alive! We know how to choose our way in life!"

Three soldiers walked towards the door. Each of them had a grenade in his hand. They stopped at the door and rolled the grenades below. The flames spread out rapidly over the store ... then silence and darkness fell; far away, above the sea, thunder was rumbling ...

Translated by Juergen W. Weil