

Jamileh Under the Cedars

(book by Henry Bordeaux)

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When Lebanon was under the French Mandate in 1918-1943, the French mission schools which had been founded there since the 19th Century flourished and doubled in number. Students listened frequently to French professors and authors who visited Lebanon to lecture, to teach or to study the traditions of that ancient country, frequently mentioned in the Bible as the land of the cedars and of high, majestic mountains. Among the visitors was a French novelist, Henry Bordeaux (1870-1963), a member of the French Academy. His novels depicted family or sentimental drama, in the manner of Andre Gide, Anatole France and other authors, who lived in the same century or a little earlier. A short stay in Lebanon inspired Bordeaux to write a novel entitled "Yamile Sous Les Cedres", which achieved an astonishing success between 1922 and 1930. All French speaking Lebanese read the book and those who were not fluent in French read the Arabic translation. None of the readers were prepared for the shedding of tears and deep emotions over the sad events of the story.

The story took place in 18th Century Lebanon. It began with an ostentatious celebration of the Lord's day, (Transfiguration Day, August, 6). The event is observed yearly, in the shade of the Cedars, by the Maronites of North Lebanon who lived in Bsharri, Ehden, Zogharta and other villages of the North. During the feast, which lasted a whole day, a sheep was killed, rich national dishes were served, folk songs were sung, hilarious jokes were told and the most exciting group dances (Debkeh) and solo dances were performed by sturdy young men and women of the proud community. Presiding over the

celebration was Sheikh Rashid, a notable from Bsharri, whose daughter Jamileh, unanimously proclaimed as "the beauty of the village", astonished the whole company with her improvised solo dances, accompanied by general clapping and flute playing. They said she owed her immaculate white complexion to the snow of the Northern mountains, and the red of her cheeks and lips to the red anemones that sprouted from the blood drops falling from the thorn-crowned head of Christ.

The day was declining, the sun was setting over the Cedars when the company's attention was aroused by the arrival of two young horsemen, clad in rich silk robes. After politely saluting the group the two men explained that they were businessmen from Accar who came to settle certain accounts with other businessmen in the district. Finding the shops closed on account of the feast, they decided to spend the night in Bsharri depending on the hospitality of the inhabitants. Sheikh Rashid, Jamileh's father and chief elder of the village considered it his duty to invite them to spend the night in his large house, and so they did.

Early in the morning, the two guests had left carrying off Jamileh and leaving behind them a horse and a note which said: "Omar Bey, the younger of the two guests, having suddenly fallen in love with Jamileh, decided to take her as his wife and by her own assent, to carry her off to his palace in Accar where their marriage would be celebrated according to God's law, whence she would become his only beloved wife. The horse left behind should be

considered as her bride price or Mahr".

The news fell upon the family as a thunder-stroke. Jamileh, since her early childhood, had been engaged to be married to her cousin Khalil, a brave young man who was passionately devoted to her. The family council met and decided to send Jamileh's brother and her fiance to Accar where they would try to bring her back, dead or alive, to her native village where she would be judged by the family council or court.

Brother and fiance took off. They were told that Jamileh would soon be moving to Tripoli where she would spend winter in a palace owned by her bridegroom. The two messengers decided to hide in a place from which they could watch the procession on its way to Tripoli. Khalil, the fiance, would shoot at her because he was a very able shooter. But the plan failed because his hand shivered as he raised it to shoot. How could he be sure that the bullet would hit Jamileh and not one of the maids? How could he accept to kill a woman to whom he had dedicated his life? It was a foolish plan, so they decided on another one. Once in Tripoli, they bribed the matron of the palace, who accepted to deliver Jamileh to them through a trick devised with the help of other maids. When Jamileh was fast asleep, she was fastened with ropes, her mouth tightly muzzled to prevent her from crying and, in this condition she was handed over to her brother and her fiance who were quick to carry her off to Bsharri where she was imprisoned in one of the rooms in her father's house. There she met her



fiance who spoke to her like a passionate lover and a faithful friend, trying to persuade her to give up Omar in order to save her life. He, Khalil, was ready to marry her, to take her away to a far land, to America, where they would enjoy peace and freedom. If she did not renounce her love, she was doomed. While he spoke, Jamileh seemed to be far away, not hearing what he said, for she was in a state of ecstasy. To her, only Omar existed. For him she was ready to sacrifice herself. Without him her life was an empty straw. For hours, Khalil entreated her, using all sorts of moving means such as crying, praying, kneeling, kissing her hands, describing the horrors of a violent death but all his efforts went to naught.

When the family council pronounced the death sentence, it was decided that she would be killed under the Cedars, in the very place where she and Omar met and fell in love. When they tied her to one of the trees, her face was shining like that of a martyr beholding an open heaven from which a group of smiling angels peeped, waving their hands in approbation. When the body fell, the executionists left the

place and Khalil was in charge of burying Jamileh. As soon as they left, Omar appeared looking like a statue of grief. He knelt next to his beloved and covered her body with kisses and hot tears rolled down his cheeks. He then wrapped her with a silk sheet, carried her in his arms and descended the mountain slope, where he was met by a group of fully armed horsemen. They put the precious body in a coffin and took it off to Tripoli.

"Will thou be satisfied, Jamileh, when, from heaven, thou will see that I have left thee dead in the arms of the one whom thou did love?" With those words, Khalil addressed Jamileh after the departure of Omar with the precious load in his arms. Khalil moaned, wailed and refused to eat until he died of grief a few months later. Omar never remarried and lived only a few miserable years and died with Jamileh's name on his lips. He ordered to be buried in the same grave and to have the names "Omar - Jamileh" engraved in the marble stone.

This story reminds me of "Weathering Heights", by Emily Bronte. Like Catherine, Jamileh was an unusual woman. A wild beauty

who worked a spell on those who gazed at her. Her blue eyes sent sparks of light which fascinated them. Her nature partook of the elements, her passion was like fire and her love like a storm. Those who loved her fell victims of their passion.

Although the events of "Jamileh Under the Cedars" are fictitious, a french troupe came to Lebanon, a few years later, to locate the names and places. But a group of Lebanese intellectuals would not allow it because it was not a real story, and therefore unrealistic.

Hence, the novel's success is due to the high of romance it aroused. Like most romantic novels, it presents unusual characters who are ready to suffer death or martyrdom for the sake of love because to them, love is predestined, irresistible, fatal and eternal. In reality it may only be a vision, a dream, an escape from a world where happiness is fleeting and where true love is inexistent or short-lived. Dream replaces reality in the romantic world and has little or no room in our materialistic age. Can true love be realistic? This question may be discussed in a subsequent article •