

Rabah Kheddouci

The girl who sells the bread

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Publications of EL-hadhara

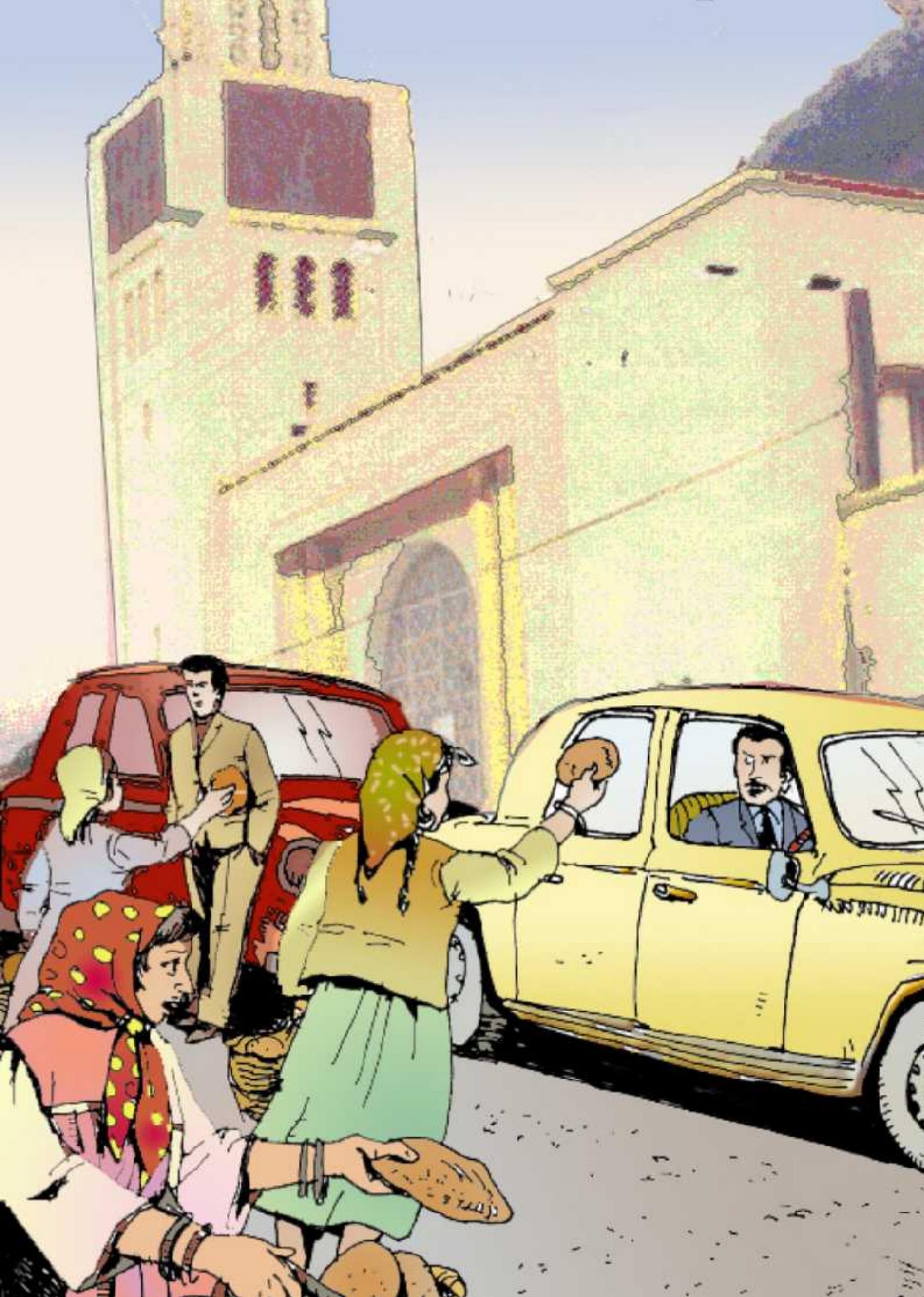
Publications of EL-hadhara
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ISBN:978-9931-357-60-5

In this fifth story, a little girl used to sell country bread in a thermal spa. All the visitors liked her tasty bread. But she unexpectedly disappeared without warning. People thought she had drowned during floods. Forty years later, four little girls strode the streets of the spa town to sell the same country bread...

The girl Halima lived on the riverbank of the River Hammam Melouane, which cut through two mountains much like a smile split two lips. The site was gorgeous with its green forests, clean water and kind people. It was also famous for its gushing thermal waters which could heal many diseases, like those of the skin, or the joints, or the bones, and so on.

Her family was poor, and thus lived on earnings of the little girl Halima, who was selling rural bread to the visitors of the thermal bath. Her mother would prepare the delicious, round-shaped bread. Halima would put bread in a plate, and then would sell it to the visitors. The fame of the bread reached the neighboring towns, as Blida, Algiers and Larbaa. Only the roosters of Hammam Melouane did precede that bread to reputation, as bathers would look after the coveted fowl. The most famous rooster was the one who crowed earlier in Hammam Melouane at dawn. It would finish in the stomach of the sick!



One day, people missed the little girl Halima, and the visitors did not find from whom they bought bread. They asked after her a lot.

One of them said:

- The rain and floods might have washed their hut beside the river the night of its overflowing. Consequently, the bread-seller Halima might have died along with her parents and her brother.

People got confused about the absence of the girl Halima, who had for years been used to running the long boulevard of Hammam Melouane.

They missed her sweet, soft voice, when she would share in the merriness of the nature, with its chirping birds in nearby forest and ripple of water of the Old River, flowing from Maqtaa Lazreg (Blue Passageway) through its three creeks: Wadi al-Heddad (The River of the Blacksmith) streaming from Chrea Mountains, Wadi al-Akhira (The River of The Last Judgment), and Wadi Boumaoune, famous for its waterfalls...

As the girl Halima did not show up, every tourist was compelled to buy the bakery's artificial bread, sighing for the lack of that delicious country bread a man could smell from afar.

The days went by and swelled into years. On day, the inhabitants were surprised by a new phenomenon which puzzled them.

The news spread quickly, and fed the tongues of both the children and the elderly.

What was that event?

Four strange girls appeared to sell country bread in the town, here and there.

People kept asking:

- Who are they? Where do they come from?

Both the residents and the visitors looked incredulous, as they said:

- Since the absence of the girl Halima for forty years now, we have not seen such bread!



Inhabitants interrogated one of the beautiful girls:

-Do you live here?

She answered:

-Yes, since yesterday!

And people were amazed when they knew that the four girls, Siham, Shahrazad, Hiziya and Khadidja, were actually the daughters of Halima, whom they thought was taken by floods of the river along with her family forty years ago.

The neighbors flocked to the house of Halima to make sure the news were true. Halima welcomed them with pleasure. Yet, they were befuddled for her long absence since childhood, and now she came back as a woman aged over fifty with four daughters.

After the greetings and kisses, one of the women asked her:

- Tell us how you went absent for such a long time? Forty years, please!

Halima replied her:

-It is a long story. A strange one, as well!



Another woman said:

- We would like to hear your story!

Halima smiled and said:

-I will tell you my story once I have finished making bread for my daughters. You know, the visitors outdoors are waiting our bread.

When Halima accomplished her work, she seated herself on a carpet, and told the women:

-A long time ago as I was little girl selling bread to people in this village, I befriended with another girl named Aziza. She had been a daughter of visitors come from Algiers. Every week, I was waiting her coming with her father. I would take Aziza to our hut. Aziza as beautiful and sensitive, and she had a cripple in her leg which impede her from walking. But when she bathed in the thermal waters of Hammam Melouane, she began to heal. After a few months, she was completely healed and became to walk like all other normal girls like me.





Aziza was very joyful once recovered. Her family bathed in happiness, and her father told her:

-Make a wish, my dear Aziza.

- I would like to live with my friend Halima.

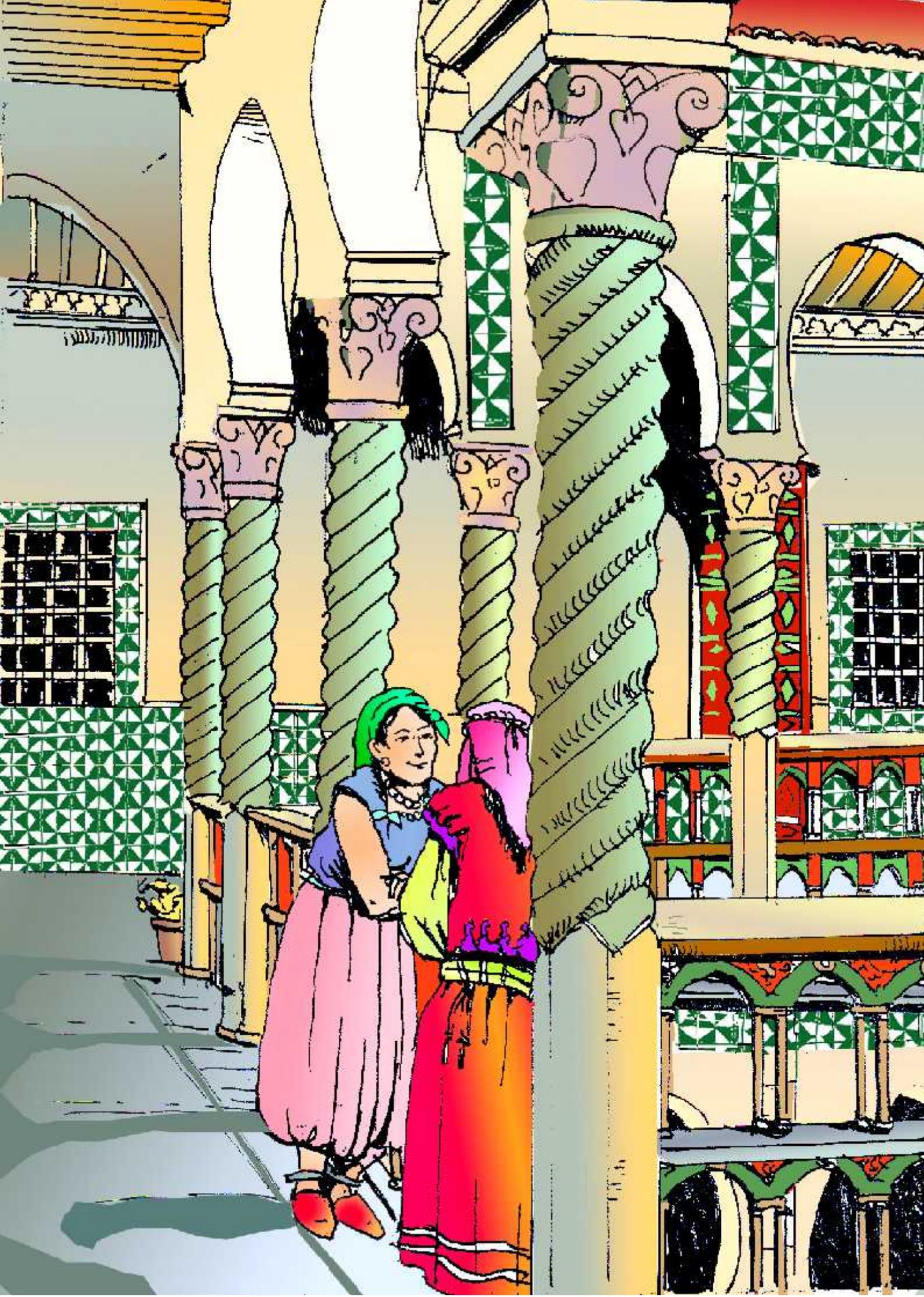
The father of Aziza told me the wish of his only child, and he asked my father's permission to let me go to live with them in Algiers. But my then-living father did not want I lived far from him, and so was my desire. Then, the surprise happened!

The eager women wanted to know more details:

-What was that surprise?

Halima responded:

- The father of Aziza introduced himself, and asked all my family to follow him to Algiers.



The women still wondered:

-Who was her father?

Halima kept silent for a while, sighed, and then said:

- He was the governor of Algiers... Truly, the Turkish Dey himself!

The women marveled at the account, as they barely believed in the story of the old Halima, who went on talking to them:

So, I and my family dwelled in the palace of the Dey, not far from his daughter Aziza, my new friend...

The day days passed by, and we enjoyed peaceful life in the palace...

And then the foreign invasion occurred, hurting all the inhabitants. The happiness of years changed into sadness after what had happened to the family of the reigning Dey...



The women asked her, all inquisitive:

- Buy what happened to your family?

Halima replied, cheerless:

- My mother died after my father fell as a martyr near the village Staouali, combating the French invasion. I and my brother Ismail became orphans and alone. Then, one of the landowning families in Mitidja adopted us. From time to time, that family would pay a visit to the family of the Dey, and I married one of the sons of my adopting family. I gave birth to four daughters. Unfortunately, the harsh days set in, as the French occupation stripped my husband of his fertile lands. When my husband yelled at the faces of the French invaders like the rooster of Hammam Melouane, they arrested him and took him away aboard a ship to faraway island, called Caledonia. Until now, he has not come back.



As to my brother Ismail, the French invaders had hunted him in Mitidja, pushing him to take refuge in the mountains of Tell Atlas, and he has not returned, too. I do not know if the wolves and lions had preyed on him. Nor do I know if he had set up home and had had children and grandchildren atop those mountains!

The mother Halima mopped the warm tears which streamed down her lukewarm cheek. She added:

- Following these difficult conditions, I did not find any help. And instead of begging for food, I decided to resort to my first work of girlhood. I went back to my old house, to assume the task I inherited from my mother: the making of country bread. I preferred to stretch out my hand full of bread. Who has said this saying is right: “*A craft in hand is better than one thousand begs!*”

