

Coming Down the Mountain

Around the turn of the century, an itinerant Turkish wrestler came one day to a village in the mountains of north-west Syria and, in a voice which rang round the hamlet, offered to take on all comers. A powerfully built man already in his forties stepped forward, seized the wrestler by the middle and threw him to the ground. ‘*Wahhish!*’, the villagers cried admiringly. ‘He’s a wild man!’ Their champion’s name was Sulayman. From then on he was known as Sulayman al-Wahhish, and Wahhish remained the family name until the 1920s.¹ This was Hafiz al-Asad’s grandfather.

On unanimous testimony Sulayman was a man of exceptional strength and courage which in the village won him a place alongside greater families. As skilful with a gun as he was with his fists, he was considered an outstanding shot in a community in which shooting contests were a favourite pastime and every boy could handle a firearm. As a target, a long needle used for sewing up sacks of grain would be stuck into a mulberry tree, and the best marksmen would smash the needle. Once the Turkish governor sent a column to the village to collect taxes and round up army recruits, for this was before the First World War when Syria was still under Ottoman rule. It was fought off by Sulayman and his friends armed with sabres and ancient muskets.

The Turks sometimes found it wise to placate the firebrands. On one occasion the governor invited Sulayman to visit him at Jisr al-Shughur, a little town on the Orontes a hard day’s ride from Sulayman’s home village. When the swaggering Sulayman rode in with a posse of several dozen companions, he demanded what entertainment had been prepared for them. ‘Lady dancers from Istanbul and Aleppo’, he was told. Sulayman spat on the ground in contempt for such frivolities. To calm him down the governor said, ‘Go to the market, take what you want and charge it to me’. So the company stormed through the souk,

loading up saddlebags with chickpeas and lentils, bolts of cloth and other household provisions. The journey had been worthwhile after all.

In time Sulayman's authority, won by his physical strength, was exercised in peaceable ways. Neighbours in those parts quarrelled easily and frequently, over boundaries or water rights, over animals gone astray, over alleged insults, but for the most part reconciliations were also easy. But if it was not possible to come to terms, the opponents would appoint a third man as judge, or *qadi*, to arbitrate between them. Sulayman's standing and sense of fair play won him a reputation as a mediator which became so widely recognized that he was once summoned to make peace between two families of the village of Zayna, near Masyaf, a day's journey away, where the local notable, Muhammad Bey Junayd, had been unable to settle the quarrel.

The real rulers of the mountains were the heads of powerful families, each lording it over a *bayt*, literally a 'house' but in effect a group of lesser families related by blood through the male line, and constituting the basic unit of Arab society. Such mountain bosses (*zu'ama* in Arabic, singular *za'im*) gave protection, used their power to bestow or withhold favours, extorted tribute and demanded respect. Some were admired for their generosity, the noblest of Arab virtues, but more often these chieftains were petty tyrants, anxious to keep the people down and not at all pleased to see young men improve their lot. Upstarts could be slung out of the village neck and crop. With their guns and horses and hard-won positions, the bosses enslaved what peasantry they could and resisted change.

But leadership by inheritance could not be guaranteed, it had to be earned. From one generation to another families rose and fell on the social scale. The mountain way of life in which each field had to be won from the rock at the price of much labour and in which each man was master of his patch and of his gun bred individualism. A man's right arm could raise him above the common herd, a strong man could come to dominate the *bey*, or local lord. Such champions shone in troubled times, and times were often troubled. As the history of Asad's grandfather Sulayman showed, in the anarchic and isolated mountains which hug the Mediterranean coast between Turkey and Lebanon, a mere peasant could rise to be a petty chief.

For the most part the people of the mountains were left to themselves, which suited them well enough, but by the same token they were utterly neglected. Outside the cities of the plains, Ottoman government scarcely existed. In the upland settlements of the wild mountains the state provided no justice or education, no health care or roads or jobs or services of any sort. The only expression of authority

was rapacious and oppressive: the tax collector or the mounted gendarme. It was not unknown for a single gendarme to ride into a village, assemble the villagers, take money if they had any, kill a chicken for his lunch, and make off back to civilization.

In Ottoman times the highlanders were so hard up that they could not even buy salt; they would walk down to the coast and carry back skins of sea water with which to flavour their dough. All were poor. Poorest of the poor were those who lived in the highest valleys and on the steep eastern slopes looking inland to the desert, people so deprived that over many generations they had been driven by hunger down to the central Syrian plain around Homs and Hama to work as virtual serfs for wealthy landowners. Well into this century there was no spare cash, no trade, no wealth other than what could be teased from the steep, stony fields. The only domestic craft was basket-making. Grain and goats were the twin foundations of this primitive economy, providing a year-round diet of bread, cracked wheat (*burghul*), yoghurt (*laban*), and clarified butter (*samneh*). The more prosperous might have a vine or two, a few fruit trees, a flock of sheep. Somewhat less wretched were the settlements on the western slopes of the mountains facing out to the Mediterranean. Sulayman's village of Qurdaha nestled in an almost Provençal landscape, although drier and whiter, little more than ten kilometres by donkey trail from the sea which could be glimpsed through a dip in the hills.

Asad's father, 'Ali Sulayman, inherited many of the characteristics of his own father: he was strong, brave, much respected and an excellent shot. Aged seventy he would pin a cigarette paper to a tree and put a pistol shot through it at a hundred paces to the admiration of the village boys. He continued the family tradition of mediating quarrels and giving protection to the weak, winning special praise in the early 1920s for helping the destitute refugees who flooded south when France surrendered parts of the former province of Aleppo to Turkey.

Born in 1875, 'Ali Sulayman knew Ottoman rule, briefly fought the French when they came, and lived on until 1963 (just long enough to witness the Ba'ath party revolution of that year which brought his son to power). He married twice and over three decades fathered eleven children.² His first wife, Sa'da, from the district of Haffeh, bore him three sons and two daughters. Then there was a five-year gap separating this set of progeny from the children of his second wife, Na'isa, a strong, comely girl twenty years his junior, the daughter of 'Uthman 'Abbud from the village of Qutilba a dozen kilometres further up the mountain. She bore him a daughter and five sons. Hafiz, born on 6 October 1930, was the fourth child of this second union.

Shortly before Hafiz's birth, 'Ali Sulayman had managed to make the transition from simple peasant to minor notable, a reward for the esteem earned by the family over two generations. His promotion was signalled in 1927 by a change in the family's name from Wahhish, 'savage', to Asad, 'lion'. There are several versions of how this came about, all flattering to 'Ali Sulayman. The one most commonly repeated is that he had so distinguished himself as a pillar of village society that leaders of the four main families came to him and urged, 'You are not a Wahhish, you are an Asad!'³

Qurdaha at that time consisted of a hundred or so mud or rough stone houses at the end of a dirt track. There was no mosque or church, no shop, no café, no paved road, no village centre. The only places where people gathered were the spring, the cemetery and the *mazar*, the white-domed shrine of local saints which was the mountains' only form of religious architecture. The Asad family houses were grouped together in their clan quarter – uncles, aunts, cousins, half-brothers, nephews all living within hailing distance. By then the Asads owned a few fields which the now aging 'Ali Sulayman could just afford not to work himself. One or two seasonal workers were brought in at harvest time, although on a day-to-day basis the family planted, weeded and watered the vegetable patch and looked after the fruit trees. 'Ali Sulayman's wife, Na'isa, fed the chickens and fattened the lamb for feast days.

Hafiz al-Asad was born in a two-room flat-roofed house of undressed stone giving on to a front yard of beaten earth. On one side there was a mud extension for the animals. A rock-strewn path led away down the hill. The simplicity of this rough-hewn dwelling could be matched right across the uplands. Qurdaha owed its existence to a spring called 'Ayn Zarqa which rose just above the village in a cave adorned with stalactites and was prized for its digestive qualities. With a gentle climate and thirty days' rainfall a year, the village provided a healthy, simple life, even a degree of ease. A more varied agriculture was possible on these western and southern foothills than in the thin soil higher up the eroded mountains. Olives had long been the most important crop, the oil being used not only for cooking but also for lighting and soap-making. Vines and figs grew here and mulberry trees provided food for silk worms, but it was tobacco which was the cash crop, the real currency of the place.

As a small boy Asad lived in the warmth and bustle of an extended family.⁴ Not only was he the ninth of 'Ali Sulayman's eleven children, but just down the road lived his Uncle 'Aziz Sulayman and his seven cousins of whom the eldest, Munira, was just a month younger than himself. His three aunts on his father's side had all married into

families in nearby villages which provided the opportunity for visits to yet more cousins there. His Aunt Sa'da in particular was to be important in his life because she married Ahmad Makhluḥ of the village of Bustan al-Basha, a close relative of the girl who was to become his future wife. As for his father's first five children, all born before the First World War, they were less like brothers and sisters to Asad and more like uncles and aunts. Their swarming children, his nephews and nieces, added fresh faces every year to the extended family.

The centre of his young life was his father, the patriarch 'Ali Sulayman, who was already fifty-five when Asad was born and must always have seemed an old man to him. He was a dignified, rather austere, figure who on special occasions such as on visits to the French authorities in Latakia wore a fez and a tie. In traditional Arab fashion, 'Ali Sulayman was not only loved by his children but also, and perhaps more so, respected and obeyed. The boys would kiss his hand in the mornings, would not sit down in his presence and as they grew up would not dare to smoke in front of him. Asad's mother Na'isa, much younger than her husband, was a strong-minded woman in her own right who came increasingly to be the dominant parent – with particular influence over her two youngest sons, Jamil born in 1933 and Rif'at born in 1937. Rif'at, a mischievous, lively child and the benjamin of the clan, was her favourite.

Asad's early years were spent largely out of doors, perched on a donkey on the way to the fields, helping with the watering of the crops or the gathering of fruit, or just scampering about in the mountains with other children, in whose lives an education hardly featured. Illiteracy was almost universal in the mountain settlements at that time. Even in 1943–4 less than a quarter of all Syrian children between the ages of six and twelve attended school.⁵ In Qurdaha as elsewhere, a man would have to go round the whole neighbourhood to find someone able to read a letter. The few people who could read were highly respected: looked to for news of the world outside, their advice was also sought on village affairs and in dealings with the government. They were even expected to provide entertainment. To pass the time in the evenings people would gather to hear tales of adventure read aloud from some old book. Asad's father was one of the literate few. There was no electricity at that time in Qurdaha and no radio, but this unusual villager subscribed to a newspaper which arrived several days late. He was the only man in the village to follow the ebb and flow of the Second World War, pin-pointing battles on a wall-map in the room where Asad slept as a boy.

'Ali Sulayman had a respect for book learning and was determined to give his younger sons an education. His first eight children had had

no schooling to speak of because none had been available. The only education to be had in the mountains under the Turks and in the early years of French rule was that provided by the village prayer leader, who might gather half a dozen boys under a tree to teach them their letters and a few passages from the Qur'an. The Turkish authorities discouraged even such basic teaching and if they heard about it would send someone to give the shaykh a beating. However, when Asad was growing up under the more liberal French, open-air classes were common, and it was in one of these that he first learned to read. By the 1930s two new factors intervened to give him opportunities denied to older members of his family. The French brought education to remote villages for the first time, and his father was by then important enough to make sure Asad benefited. When a primary school was opened in Qurdaha, 'Ali Sulayman was able to secure Asad a place, thus making him the first of his children to start a formal education, one of a handful of boys in his village to be so fortunate.

The 'Alawis

The highlanders were in their great majority 'Alawis, members of an extreme Shi'i Muslim sect which, like the Druzes and the Isma'ilis, was a remnant of the Shi'i upsurge which had swept Islam a thousand years before: they were islands left by a tide which had receded. 'Alawis share with other Shi'a the belief that 'Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was his rightful heir but was robbed of his inheritance by the first three Caliphs. They push reverence for the wronged 'Ali to extreme lengths by seeing him as infused with divine essence. Over the centuries this and other esoteric beliefs caused them to be denounced by Sunnis as infidels deserving death, and in self-defence they became secretive about their religion, adopting, like other extremist Shi'i sects, the doctrine of *taqiya*, that resort to a prudent duplicity which justified cloaking their true beliefs. When Sunni orthodoxy regained the upper hand from the thirteenth century onwards, pockets of sectarians took shelter where they could. No one is quite certain where exactly the 'Alawis came from or when they first occupied their mountains. They themselves say their ancestors came west to the Mediterranean several hundred years ago from the Jabal Sinjar, a mountainous redoubt in present-day Iraq between the Tigris and the Euphrates, and before that from Arabia itself where they claim parentage with the most ancient tribes. Such a lineage has been traced for Hasan bin Makzum, considered the father of one of the largest

‘Alawi tribes, who died in 1240.⁶ These ancestors, fleeing from stronger enemies or persecuted because of suspected heresies, found refuge in the inaccessible valleys high above the sea.

The names, values and tribal organization of the ‘Alawis derive both from their distant nomadic background and from the experience of life in the mountains over the last few centuries. Today’s ‘Alawi tribal structures reflect what is left of this heritage. Most ‘Alawis belong to one of four main tribal confederations, the Haddadin, the Matawira, the Khaiyatin, and the Kalbiya – and it is to the Kalbiya that Asad’s grandfather Sulayman belonged. Originally each of the four big groupings was probably concentrated in a distinct part of the mountains, but over time the tribes intermingled so that even a hamlet of a hundred people might have Haddadin and Khaiyatin living side by side, if not in harmony. In addition, three smaller tribes, the Darawisa, the Mahaliba and the ‘Amamira, settled at the northern end of the mountain range while several thousand ‘Alawis lived, largely detribalized, on the plains outside the mountain areas. As a result tribal maps of the ‘Alawi district are not neat affairs but show inextricable overlappings. Sulayman’s village of Qurdaha, however, was less of a tribal mosaic than others. Overwhelmingly Kalbiya and the seat of the principal religious dignitary of the tribe, it was sometimes called Qurdaha al-Kalbiya.

‘Alawis today are not always comfortable with the subject of tribal affiliations as the Ba‘thist state has striven to replace such categories with the modern notion of citizenship, but if pressed every village boy could tell you to which tribe his family belongs. Asked to name the leading tribes and families of Qurdaha, the head of the municipality replied, ‘We have no tribes or families here. We are all members of the Ba‘th family under the leadership of Hafiz al-Asad.’ Only then, after some coaxing, did he mention the Kalbiya clans which trace their lineage back hundreds of years.⁷

The name of the ‘Alawi community is of recent coinage dating only from the French Mandate. Before the First World War the community was known either as the Nusayriya after its alleged founder Muhammad ibn Nusayr, a ninth-century religious propagandist, or, in a variant of the same word, as the Ansariya, the traditional name of the mountain range which they inhabited. Only in recent decades has a member of the community become known as an ‘Alawi or Alawite, strictly speaking a follower of ‘Ali, the fountainhead of Shi‘ism, a name which places the ‘Alawis within the family of Shi‘i sects.

The history of ‘Alawi or Nusayri beliefs is misty indeed. The earliest references come from Druze polemics against them in the eleventh

century when, to the outrage of Druze theologians, Nusayri missionaries started proselytizing among the newly arrived Druzes in southern Lebanon. The Nusayris make a fleeting appearance in Crusader chronicles and later in a few travellers' tales and reports by European consuls, but it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century that a determined attempt to throw light on them was made by the Reverend Samuel Lyde in *The Asian Mystery*, published in London in 1860. He based his work on the first Nusayri text to come to the attention of Western scholars, a book called *The Manual of Shaykhs* which he bought from a Christian merchant of Latakia into whose hands it had fallen during the Egyptian conquest of Syria in the 1830s. The next breakthrough came with the publication in 1900 of René Dussaud's *Histoire et Religion des Nosairis*, itself based on a book published in Beirut in 1863 by Sulayman al-Adhana, a Nusayri turned Christian who was later killed for his apostasy. Adhana's book contained the Nusayris' principal prayers and instructions and an account of their fundamental beliefs. On these rather shaky foundations,⁸ more recent scholars have built a fuller picture of the sect, although most readily admit that it remains, in Philip Hitti's words, a 'partially unsolved religious riddle'.⁹

There seems little doubt, however, that the Nusayris are a schismatic offshoot from mainstream 'Twelver' Shi'ism whose history for the last thousand years has been one of stubborn survival in the face of invasion and repression. The Franks of the First Crusade (1098) seized their strongpoints in the mountains and built castles on them. In the early twelfth century the then powerful Isma'ilis stormed up from their base in the plain at Salamiya and also built fortresses in Nusayri country, where pockets of them remain to this day still at odds with their neighbours. Saladin conquered the area in 1188 and demanded tribute. The Mamluk Sultans who followed him over the next century routed the Isma'ilis, drove out the last Crusaders, and tried forcibly to convert the Nusayri sectarians to orthodox Islam. When the fourteenth century traveller Ibn Battuta passed through the mountains he recorded that the Nusayris were compelled to build mosques. The Syrian theologian Ibn Taymiya (1263–1328), a champion of Sunni orthodoxy, condemned the Nusayris as more dangerous than the Christians and urged Muslims to make holy war on them – a text which still provides ammunition for their twentieth-century opponents.

Their next oppressors were the Ottoman Turks who conquered Syria at the beginning of the sixteenth century and made a new attempt to force orthodoxy on the Nusayris. Ottoman government, lasting until 1918, was interrupted briefly by a decade of Egyptian rule from 1832,

which far from bringing relief meant better organized and still more severe repression. By this time the highlanders were widely despised as heretics and outcasts and it was only with the coming of the French Mandate after the First World War that the Nusayris felt free from persecution.

Education

In 1939–1940, when Asad was nine, his parents sent him away to school in Latakia on the coast. He was later to describe coming down the mountain to the city for the first time as ‘the crucial turning point of my life’.¹⁰ The boy spent the first three months with a married sister but when her husband had to move elsewhere, the young Asad was left without relations in the city and was put up in a humble lodging-house owned by a family acquaintance. He remembered that period as a sad one because of the distance from his family – ‘In those days the thirty kilometres from Qurdaha to Latakia seemed almost as great as the distance today between Damascus and London’ – but also as joyful because of the children of his own age with whom he ran about the town. It was a challenge for a child of the mountains to be thrown into urban life at the deep end. Asad now had his first lesson in what it was to be a member of an ill-regarded minority. ‘Alawis were not well placed in Latakia, which was then three parts Sunni Muslim and one part made up of various Christian sects and denominations. Few in number, perhaps only some hundreds, the ‘Alawis had little influence in the city and were generally sneered at. They did their best to keep out of trouble, living quietly in the poorer parts of town, and Asad was understandably homesick. He found himself there at a dramatic moment. Vichy France, then ruling Syria and living in fear of a British attack (which did not in fact come until the summer of 1941), built air-raid shelters, imposed a blackout and censorship and reinforced its troops. These warlike preparations unsettled the young Asad.’¹¹

In the city I knew no one. With whom could I fight and against whom? I felt the village was a much safer place and wished I was back home. But I was not much concerned about the Second World War: I was far more worried about my homework.

These months in Latakia made him grow up faster than his village contemporaries. For the first time in his life he was away from his parents, and his eyes were opened to another way of life. He did well

at school, winning several small certificates of merit which were the first things he presented to his father when he went home in the summer of 1940. After this instructive year he returned to his village school, and in that narrow setting he was already someone who had distinguished himself.

In 1942 Asad was one of only four boys from his village to sit the examination for the primary school certificate, a vital hurdle on the way to a secondary education. The candidates' documents had to be sent to Latakia well in advance and as a preliminary the four boys rode down the hill on donkeys to the coast to have their pictures taken by a pavement photographer. Then came the matter of the letters of application. Simply to be allowed to sit the examination required submitting a request, written in the pupil's own hand to 'His Excellency the Minister of Education' in the Latakia administration. The first paragraph had to begin so many millimetres in from the margin. This was the occasion of many false starts, many torn up sheets of paper. 'It took the four of us a whole day to write out our applications in a slow, meticulous hand. We believed that if we were one millimetre out or if we made a single mistake we would be rejected.'¹² The school principal took the letters, photographs and birth certificates in a large sealed envelope to Latakia.

All that remained now was the examination itself. In the 1940s there was only one secondary school along the whole length of the coast, from the northern frontier of Lebanon to Alexandretta, serving Latakia, Tartus, Jableh, and the entire mountain hinterland. Competition for admission was stiff, but Asad was good at arithmetic, Arabic and subjects which required learning by rote.

I remember our headmaster took us aside and warned us not to get confused by the questions or be frightened by the sight of unfamiliar teachers in Western dress and speaking both French and Arabic. 'You are as good as the town boys' he told us, words we remembered when we went into the exam.

Indeed the country boys' results proved to be among the best.¹³

Asad inherited an important legacy from his grandfather and father – he was born into a family which was vigorously bettering itself at a time when the 'Alawi community as a whole was emerging from its long neglect. His grandfather Sulayman made the family's reputation for physical and moral strength. His muscular legacy offers an important clue to Asad's character. From his time on, the Asads became people who were not submissive, who did not defer or knuckle

under, and who were not easily pushed around. They were a tough lot who were known to be moving up. Although their clan was smaller and poorer than many, they seized every opportunity for self-improvement.

The contribution of Asad's father, 'Ali Sulayman, was to make the family yet more prominent, to give his son an education which earned him self-respect and the respect of others. An official document of 1936 which lists leading figures of the region describes 'Ali Sulayman al-Asad as a *chef alaouite*, or head of a clan, although his position in the list indicates that he occupied a lesser place than the leading dignitaries of the community.¹⁴ A 1942 survey of 'Alawi tribes and clans, made by a wartime British Political Officer,¹⁵ shows 'Ali Sulayman's family to be the head of the minor al-'A'ila clan of the Kalbiya tribe, a modest eminence but a real one. In their home village the Asads had carved out a place for themselves, even though they were still a good deal less influential than the leading Qurdaha families of Hassun, 'Uthman and al-Khayyir.

To his father's influence Asad owed a lifelong interest in books, poetry and the Arabic language. One day when he was in his teens, his father challenged him and one of his brothers to a memory competition: who would be first to learn a long poem by Hassan ibn Thabit (a friend of the Prophet Muhammad who followed him into battle and commemorated his deeds in verse). The poem was copied out and the boys went out of doors to study it. Asad was the first back but found that his father had already closed the book and was ready to recite. Developing a good memory became something of a family tradition and, in Asad's later years, his elephantine-powers of recall were a source of uneasy admiration among his staff. It was also remarked that his accomplished use of classical Arabic, especially in off-the-cuff speeches, distinguished him in public life.

Because of his education and his vigorous personality, Asad was soon seen as the heir to Sulayman and 'Ali Sulayman. As his father was so old – eighty by the time Asad was twenty-five – the young man came to assume certain family responsibilities. In particular, he helped his mother with his two younger brothers, Jamil and Rif'at who, being less serious and single-minded, regarded him as a somewhat stern father-figure whose approval they sought but whose authority they liked to challenge. Asad was the first member of his family to leave the world of Qurdaha behind. His parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and half-brothers remained rooted in the village, but from an early age he was out on his own, learning to think for himself and acquiring interests and ambitions beyond their horizon.