CHILDREN OF MARTYRS

Posted on August 8, 2015 by Keghart

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Category: Opinions

By **Philip Zakarian**
Translated by **Vahe H. Apelian,** Loveland OH, 8 August 2015

This is an excerpt from Zakarian's* The Vigil of the Last Orphans *(Beirut, 1974). He is also the author of* The Orphans Built a House *(1972).

The "I" has filled the living room. I want to tell him that it is not necessary to talk that loud and that his latest fashion wear, the expensive ring glittering on his finger, his plump neck are convincing testaments that whatever he says are true. I want to tell him other things as well but consideration won't let me. He is the teacher of my children who by his presence graces us in our humble dwelling. I feel obliged to be a gracious host.

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"I do not accept a salary of two thousand pounds," --the words of the young teacher slap me. "I teach in two other schools and have refused another one. I hardly have time for private lessons that cost twenty pounds per lesson. During the summers I make much more. Next year I will give classes in two other odar (non-Armenian) schools. My salary will top three thousand pounds, three thousand!....."

He is an Armenian teacher who knows the value of money better than a money exchanger. He will continue to talk. You may not listen to him, you may be immersed in your thoughts or you may leave your body in the living room and make a mental leap to forgotten worlds.

The teacher's abundantly flowing golden words eventually push me back, further back all the way to my childhood years in the tin hut of our camp.

The hot weather of July bakes the tin roofs that start crackling. Rust flakes fall on our heads. The tin

rooftops of the other huts seem to be evaporating in a white 'flame' snaking upward. My eyes glare from the reflecting lights. I take a towel, wet it with cold water from the jar, lie over the sofa and cover my face with the damp cloth. Having taken refuge under its refreshing coolness, I try to sleep.

I hear my elder brother, the "father" of our family commanding me: "Go to the pharmacy and bring the money."

I do not move. The eyes of the pharmacist grill my heart much worse than the hot rays of the July sun.

"Did you not hear? Bring some money," repeats the command.

"Why don't you go?" I murmur wiping out the sweat off my face.

"You go, my son," intervenes my mother. "Your brother will go to look for a job and you know well that he is not the type to ask for money."

Reluctantly I get off of the sofa and slowly put on my pants. "Five piasters are mine," I shout as I hurl myself to the street. The baked soil broils the soles of my feet. Hopping, I make it to the pharmacy.

"Again. What is that you want? Get out," angrily bellows the pharmacist.

"Some money from my brother's salary, if possible," I murmur.

"Oho, you are way too much." The eyes of the pharmacist grow red in anger.

"Don't you people have shame? Did I not give you two gold pounds last week? Is it heard to be asking for money every day? Why, do you think that I have opened a bank here?"

The Mr. Pharmacist is the treasurer of the board of the trustees of the school where my brother teaches. Every summer, piece by piece, he hands in their remaining salary to the teachers, much like throwing bones to a dog.

I return home. "There is no money," I say. I wet the towel again, wrap it around my head, and crouch in my former place. I do not pay attention to the conversation between my brother and my mother. I know the script by heart to its minutest detail.

My mother will say: "My son, you have a university education. How many do you think have the diploma you have? There are a thousand jobs for you to find. Why don't you leave teaching?"

My brother will answer: "Mother, for the love of God; do not start over again. I will die as a teacher."

"Hungry like this?"

My brother will answer: "Yes, hungry like this".

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The next evening a tenacious, depressing darkness had descended over the camp but an early spring-like jubilant and nourishing sun was shining in our hut. An engineer had entrusted my brother to supervise the construction of a road between Maameltein and Ghazir (approximately 4 miles apart). It's a two-month long job with triple the salary my brother earns. My brother had rented a room in Ghazir and my mother, exuding the exuberance of a young girl, is engaged in the preparation for the trip.

In the morning, way before the sunrise, a mule-driven cart stood in front of our small home. It's a cart that hauls sand and gravel. Beds, a table, three chairs and few kitchen utensils fill the vehicle to capacity. My mother situates herself next to the driver. I climb over the bundles and my brother treads along. We hit the road towards Ghazir.

The weather was cool and pleasant. I felt myself closer to heaven than ever. My brother walked by my side. The light from the lanterns hanging by the spokes of the wheel cast different images of him. At times the shadow would get longer, at times rounder. Other times it would climb up the trees or lie full length on the road. The leaves of the trees were so low that at times they hit my face. "Stay still, do not fall," says my brother gently hitting my bare feet with his stick. The only person who felt uneasy was mother. Had she not felt ashamed from the coachman, she would have been crying. Every now and then she would lean towards my brother and would plead like a guilty person.

"You got tired my son; come and take my place. Let me walk a bit too."

"Enjoy yourself," would answer my brother. "Mother, I am a man who has walked five times from Jbeil to Beirut ."

Our first stop was at Nahr-El-Kalb. When the mule immersed its muzzle into the clear water and started drinking, the rays of the sun started falling on the treetops. After half an hour we resumed our journey. The coachman forced my brother next to my mother, took the reins of the mule speeding up its pace while whistling an old tune.

At noon the mule was grazing under the shades of the Maalmtein trees and we were hungrily munching the boiled potatoes.

After a long recess, when the sun started leaning towards west, we began the hardest part of our journey. Because the road became very steep, the mule was bending forward at a sharp angle. We thought the beast might fall at any moment. Every now and then the coachman and my brother would help the mule to turn the wheels of the cart with less stress. I also descended from the cart. I would watch in bewilderment their toil unable to decide who was perspiring more--the mule, the coachman or my brother?

At dusk, when we reached Ghazir, an argument broke between the coachman and my brother.

"I do not take money from the teacher of my children," insisted the coachman.

My mother intervened to no avail. My brother got angry. The coachman, without uttering a word, brought down the load. "May God protect you," said the coachman and rapidly drove the cart down the hill.

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My brother did not get used to his new job. In the evening he would return home tired. He would throw his body over the bed and stay still for a long time.

"What is ailing you, my son?" my mother would reproach my brother.

"I cannot; I cannot stand it," would lament my brother. "I get tormented watching them work. I am simply consumed. I take refuge under the shade of a tree and supervise them toil under the scorching sun, cutting stones for long hours. They take the sharp-edged stones with their bare hands and hammer them into pieces. I feel as if they hammer my heart."

"They are used to it, son. In time you will get used it," my mother tries to console.

"Not all of them are laborers, mother. They come and ask for a job. There is a story to tell from the gaze of each one of them. I cannot refuse them. Had you been there today you would have seen the two young ones bleeding profusely from their nostrils. Yesterday one of the elder workers was taken away dazed from sunstroke. Where do these Armenians come from? Who has told them that there is an Armenian supervisor? I don't know but every day I see new faces asking for a job."

Those were gloomy days. My brother's expression bore a stark resemblance to someone nailed on a cross.

One day we had an unexpected visitor. He was the colleague of my brother, Mr. Mihran. Our gloomy faces brightened. Mr. Mihran was my hero. More than being a teacher, he was our playmate. He would lock his fingers behind his neck and would stand in the middle of the school's yard looking at us. Six of us would hang from his arms. He would start twirling around speeding his pace. We would get dizzier and dizzier and each one of us one by one would fall from his arms on the soft sand much like ripe fruits. Other times he would wrap a rope around his waist and challenge the students to pull from the other end. Most of the times, he would be the winner. The sound of his voice would echo louder than the school bell. Wherever he was, there would be laughter and joy.

My brother had forgotten his sorrows and giggled like a child until that very moment when Mr. Mihran assumed a solemn look and turned to my brother and said

"I have come here to ask you to give a job."

"What job?" asked my brother.

"A laborer's job," answered Mr. Mihran

"I hope you are not serious," said my brother his voice buried deep in his throat.

"I am all too serious," said Mr. Mihran

"Mihran, do not be a fool," said my brother angrily. "You cannot do a laborer's job. You cannot even watch them work."

"It would be easier than watching a hungry wife and children," murmured Mr. Mihran.

My brother could not convince him otherwise.

"I am not like you, a mom's boy," said Mr. Mihran. "I am much like the trunk of an old oak tree. I can do the job of ten laborers. Besides, I cannot return home empty-handed."

"Like Pontius Pilate, I wash my hands," said my brother with his former somber expression covering his face even more than before.

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The next evening my brother entered the room with his head down.

"Where is Mr. Mihran?" asked my mother.

My brother looked towards the door and signaled with his head. I followed my mother. I saw Mr. Mihran. My youthful soul cried. In ten hours, the man who projected vitality had crumbled into ruins. His face looked as if it was set ablaze. His hair was covered with dust. Bloody kneecaps were visible from his pants. He entered in and sat besides my brother. They did not speak. Time went by and the dinner was waiting for them on the table. My brother held Mr. Mihran from his arms and supported him to the table. Both sat still for a long time with their heads bowed. Every now and then my brother would put something into his mouth and chew with the stubbornness of a camel. Mr. Mihran's gaze was focused on a distant object as he stood still like a statue.

"My son, why don't you eat?" asked my mother, placing her hand on Mr. Mihran's shoulder.

The silence became more pressing.

"Mihran, my son, why don't you eat something?" The question was repeated more softly and more earnestly.

"Look at his hands," said my brother and left the room in a hurry.

Mr. Mihran hid his hands in his pocket like a student caught in mischief.

"Open your hands," said my mother and knelt next to him to see closely.

The fingers of Mr. Mihran had frozen stiff onto the palms of his hands.

They would not open. My mother gently tried to open them. I was following my mother with

apprehension. As soon as the fingers opened, my mother let go of Mr. Mihran's hands with horror. She covered her face with her palms and bemoaned "My God, My God." The palms of Mr. Mihran had cuts in every direction. The flesh threatened to come out from the bloody cuts.

My mother's life had been a series of sorrows. Sorrow had forged her and had made her indestructible. For a brief moment she looked at Mr. Mihran with compassion and pity. Then she pulled her strength together and sat next to him. She took a morsel from the dinner and said: "Mihran, my son. Open your mouth; you have to eat. I as well am your mother. You will obey me. After your dinner I will wash your face and hair. I will mend your pants. Open your mouth again and turn your face towards me. It's better this way. I have something to tell you. God sent you here to help my son. He cannot handle the demands of his job by himself. You will have to share his burden and his work. He cannot shoulder all his responsibilities by himself and I do not want him to bear it all by himself. You two are brothers. You will not refuse me. Tomorrow you will have to work together, laugh together and weep together. Of what use is your friendship if you are unable to halve bread between you? Both of you are children of martyrs."

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"Dad, your coffee is getting cold."

The voice of my daughter interrupted my moving screen. For a second different pictures cluttered my mind in rapid succession and then came the light of our living room.

The teacher of my children was continuing his talk with increasing animation.

"Last summer, my tour of Europe cost me six thousand pounds. Next year…"

Pound - Refers to Lebanese Lira

Piaster - 100 piasters equal to one Lira (Pound)