

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# THE FIRE AND THE SUN (1918)

FALIH RIFKI ATAY

## Synopsis

In this work, Falih Rifki Atay narrates his four years on the Syrian-Palestinian front as Cemal Pasha's private clerk during the First World War. After a long and difficult journey, he reaches the Sinai Desert, and during his time in the desert, he is convinced that this place is the tomb of the Anatolians. By including the narratives of other officers from time to time, he expresses how unfamiliar the desert life is for Anatolians.

## People

Faisal bin Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi  
Hussein bin Ali  
Omar Fahreddin Turkkani

Emir of Mecca  
Sharif of Mecca  
Governor of Medina

## Events

### *A Long Journey*

Falih Rifki finds a place for himself in the third class of a military train, as passenger trains do not run. Throughout his journey, he has to spend time with people, who are unaware of rules of good manners. Moreover, there are so many sick passengers who make him feel like he is in a hospital.

The first stop is Eskisehir, the second is Konya, and the last one is Pozanti. When they arrive in Eskisehir late, they find the bazaar crowded and lively. Falih Rifki spends the night in a hotel. After one day, they reach Konya, where there is nothing but villages.

Falih Rifki does not encounter anything that reminds him of the war, either in Eskisehir or Konya, except for the troops going to Istanbul or Pozanti. He even thinks that Anatolia is not very interested in the war. He is convinced that what is happening in the city does not have an effect on the villages and hearts.

He asks a doctor he met on the way if there is a comfortable hotel, and the doctor brings him to the hotel where he is staying. However, the hotel is so dirty and neglected that Falih Rifki never forgets the night he spends here. On the way back to the train the next morning, he sees a hotel as good as the ones in Istanbul and asks the doctor why he didn't suggest it. The doctor says that its food is European. Thereupon, Falih Rifki better understands his fellow travelers.

He continues his journey in the compartment with this doctor and an officer. Since they are both sick, they sleep all day, and he moves very little so as not to disturb them. A man, who gets into the compartment, tells him that many people have become beggars, and mothers have been forcing their children to beg. Falih Rifki does not hear a single good thing from anyone he meets during his journey.

When they arrive in Pozanti in the evening, he asks a man if there is a place to stay. The man says that the passengers who find a car continue on their way and that it is forbidden to sleep on the train. While wandering around helplessly, Falih Rifki comes across a district governor. When the district governor learns that he is going to Jerusalem, he says that he is heading toward Aleppo, that they can rent a car together, and then he arranges a place for both of them in a barrack where only the officers can stay.

The next day they leave in a three-horse carriage. They reach Tarsus in one day. For the first time in a long time, Falih Rifki finds a warm meal and a comfortable room here. After resting, he takes the train to Gulek with the district governor. As the train moves toward the warmer regions, he feels the influence of Arabic more and more. He even observes that the soil is different from Anatolian soil. When they arrive in Osmaniye at midnight, they find neither a hotel nor food. While the district governor stays in the carriage with the belongings, Falih Rifki goes to the police station and asks for a

place to stay. The commissioner sends him to a man's house with an officer. The landlord lets Falih Rifki stay in a dirty place like a barn, where many travelers sleep with their horses.

In the morning, the district governor tells Falih Rifki that he wants to tell him something, but he does not want him to write it in the newspaper. At night, while sleeping on the encrypted messages that are entrusted to Falih Rifki, he whips his own foot, mistaking it for a stranger's hand. Falih Rifki listens to the incident and thanks him for his sacrifice.

They reach Islahiye at night. Since there is no place to stay, they have to continue on their way, but when the coachman falls asleep, they fall into a ditch. They go to the military tent they see in the countryside and ask for help. After getting their cars repaired by the soldiers, they set off again.

They get on the train in Rajo, and Falih Rifki arrives in Sebastia after days of travel. He crosses into Nablus by a carriage pulled by mules. He spends the night in a comfortable hotel built by the Germans and the next day proceeds to Jerusalem in a horse-drawn carriage with five other passengers.

### *In the Desert*

The desert that has to be crossed to reach the Canal is 350 km long. People and animals come here from Rumelia and Anatolia, ammunition from Europe and Istanbul, food from Northern Syria, Aleppo and Adana. However, camels are from Syria, Hijaz and Iraq, as the declining Ottoman Empire does not have a camel organization, including experts.

Falih Rifki sleeps at the bottom of the rocks with the soldiers. Finding a shady spot is almost impossible. Everyone has the right to drink a bottle of water every 24 hours. Those who seek more than that are severely punished. Only the commander is entitled to a second bottle to wash his face. As these rules are strictly followed, Falih Rifki sees the commander refuse to give a second bottle to a man who hasn't washed his face for weeks. All the soldiers eat rusks, and the camels are fed with the crumbs. That's why many of the camels die on the way.

### *Life in the Desert*

Every tribe in the desert has a sheikh. Every sheikh is accompanied by a Muslim judge and a retaliation officer. However, other judges are appointed for women in the courts. Falih Rifki hears that the sheikhs give strange punishments. For example, he learns that it is customary to have a man and a woman executed by their fathers and brothers if they make love. Killers pay off or get killed. The charge consists of 40 camels, a female Arabian camel, and a marriageable girl. This girl is taken to the tent of the deceased man's closest male relative and is made a concubine until she gives birth to a son. When the child is old enough to carry a jug with his right hand, while keeping a sword under his right arm, she stands in front of the sheikh and asks her master who the child is from. If the master owns the child, she leaves the child there and returns to her family.

A friend of Falih Rifki tells him in a letter what he saw at a desert wedding he attended. At the wedding, the bride and groom sit on a rock and express that they accept each other as spouses. The girl's father gives the garbage in his hand to the groom, and the groom puts it on his head. That means that your daughter is on top of my head, even if she is garbage. After the bride and groom have a little chat at night, the bride runs to the place where there is a pit prepared during the day. The groom follows her, and they spend the night in that pit.

### *The Notes of a Commissioned Officer*

Falih Rifki shares the war notes of an officer who is on the first expedition to the Canal. The officer writes that they stay wherever the water is, and the water sources decide where they take a rest.

Bedouins they meet in the desert collect the barley grains from their camels' droppings and the bones they throw away when they can eat meat. The officer dreams of going to the Canal and drowning there as he sees them in this state.

The hot air, the sand, the dirty water, and the disease make him feel exhausted. But he doesn't hear any of the soldiers complain. He regrets that they are on this expedition, thinking that Anatolia needs wheat, not Egypt.

One night, he hears someone in the distance watering camels. As he listens to the camels drinking water, he thinks that they, as Anatolians, are different people from the people in this desert and fantasizes the sounds of cows in Anatolian villages.

In the end, many soldiers get killed by the British in the Canal. The commanders decide to go back and start preparing the road, water, and food for next year. Thus, the remaining soldiers are saved from dying from hunger and thirst.

When he is tasked with collecting information on the activities of the British in the Canal, he makes a deal with the Bedouins. Then, he sets off with 15 camel masters, 15 soldiers, 16 Bedouins, and 3 volunteer Indians. As he gets closer to the British, he thinks about how the people living in Istanbul do not care about them. He goes to the coast of Egypt with the 6 soldiers he chooses. Then they cross the Nile together. They cut telephone and telegraph wires. They place dynamite on a bridge.

After this mission, he always fantasizes about such dangerous expeditions. Indeed, he receives a second similar order. This time his team includes 8 Bedouins and 22 camels, and they cross the Nile in the same way and place dynamite on the train tracks. Two wagons explode. But he loses his leg in one of such adventures.

#### *Another Officer's Notes*

What upsets the officer most is the inequality between them and the British. While the British have good uniforms and well-kept horses, the Ottoman soldiers have weak horses and simple clothes. While the British sacrifice their colonial soldiers, the Ottomans lose their own citizens.

When the British are defeated in the Battle of Katia, 400 British horses fall into the hands of the Ottomans. Capturing such powerful and obedient animals bring some joy to them. But the defeats that follow leave many warriors graveless.

The officer begins to fear becoming like the insensitive Bedouins. Because of this fear, he stays in places with no Bedouins. He sees that nothing remains constant in the desert, and that everything takes a new shape every day. He likens leaving their dead in such a place to throwing them into the sea.

He and his fellow soldiers starve when there is no food. As the British soldiers are aware of this, they leave tin cans on the fences stretched in front of their trenches. Ottoman soldiers wait for the night to get them. When the time comes, one of them crawls to the trenches, but there are grenades in the cans. After that night, the soldiers begin to think that a tin can is something magical.

#### *Halet*

Falih Rifki runs into Halet in Aleppo in the second year of the war. Halet is a sergeant major that he met during the occupation of Edirne. While in Aleppo, Halet is ordered to form a troop of people he wants and go to the desert. He finds a tailor, has uniforms made and ironed, takes all the soldiers to the barbershop, and takes care of them. But shortly after he goes to the front, he is killed by the British.

#### *Mehmet*

Falih Rifki is promoted to officer after completing his last Palestine tour and returning to Jerusalem. One day, the commander asks everyone to choose a personal servant, and Falih Rifki chooses Mehmet. Mehmet is a man with sunburned and injured hands.

Every day, he comes up to Falih Rifki many times and takes orders from him. He fulfills everything that is asked of him with great seriousness. In fact, he is so serious that everyone wonders why he never smiles.

When Falih Rifki goes to Istanbul, he takes Mehmet with him. Although he expects Mehmet to wonder about the capital and wander around a bit, Mehmet does not leave his door for a moment. When he asks why he does not tour the city, he implies that he finds it meaningless to travel in a place he does not know. Falih Rifki is convinced that Mehmet does not want to be humiliated by urban people.

One day, while in Jerusalem, the glass of an officer friend of Falih Rifki's watch is broken, and he asks Mehmet to get it repaired. Although Mehmet does not know Jerusalem at all and his Arabic is very limited, he finds the glass and has the clock repaired. Falih Rifki asks him if his friend is satisfied with the outcome, but Mehmet says that he is never satisfied.

When Falih Rifki finds out that Mehmet has not been to his village for five years and that he does not even know if he has a child, he advises him to write a letter to his family. Mehmet writes the letter. His father writes his reply on another letter Mehmet wrote three years ago. When Falih Rifki gives his father's letter to him, Mehmet is vaguely happy. Falih Rifki gives him a month off, suggesting having a child.

After 3 years, Mehmet falls ill upon a night in the rain, and Falih Rifki sends him back to his village.

### *Two Promises*

Falih Rifki meets Fahreddin Pasha in Aleppo when he is assigned to report on the disorder in Urfa. Fahreddin Pasha is later assigned to Medina. Pasha promises that he will not leave Medina, no matter what, in the face of the uprising led by Hussein bin Ali. But he cannot keep his word.

Falih Rifki gets to know Faisal in Jerusalem. Before leaving Mecca for a short time, Faisal promises all the officers that he will remain loyal to the caliph and the state. However, he does not keep his word too.

Falih Rifki condemns that these two promises are not kept. However, since it is impossible to bring food to Madinah by land, he states that the one who gives up on Medina is the homeland itself.

### **Themes**

**Perseverance** Falih Rifki travels from Istanbul to the desert under bad conditions and with people he does not want to spend time. After this long and difficult journey, he and everyone from Anatolia try to fulfill their military obligations under unfamiliar conditions. In this environment where even the most basic needs, such as water, are limited, everyone perseveres and mobilizes their personal resources for the demands of the state.

**Submission** Anatolians, who are brought to the desert to fight, do what they are ordered without any complaints, despite all the difficulties they face. Mehmet, who runs Falih Rifki's errands, embodies this submissive character of the soldiers. Mehmet always does what is asked of him. For example, when the officer asks him to get his watch repaired, even though he knows that the officer does not appreciate anything, he does his best. Just like him, everyone follows the orders without expecting any appreciation.

### **Bibliography**

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