

THE YEAR OF LOCUSTS.



Nile Mission Press, Cairo, Assiut, Jerusalem.
Algiers Mission Band, El-Biar, Algiers.

THE YEAR OF LOCUSTS.

Nobody could doubt that Ismail was an ignorant boy. Perhaps it was not entirely his fault. He had never been to school, because he started work from his infancy on a farm situated several kilometres from his house. On the other hand his village was poorly populated and during the 28 years of his life he had never left the neighbourhood.

However, he was wrong, because he was aware of his ignorance and did not confess the fact; he never tried to train himself by questioning those who knew more than he did. From this point arises the story I am going to narrate :

His father had died a few months before and, contrary to his expectation, had left him some hundreds of francs. Ismail employed this sum of money in purchasing four hectares (feddans) of land in the vicinity of his hut and four hundred measures of barley seed; after purchasing these he still had sufficient money left to live on comfortably with his family up to the time of harvest. So he borrowed a mule and a plough and began to sow the

seed himself, persuading himself that with the big revenue expected he would be able to buy other farms upon which he would build a house roofed with tiles.

The spring of that year happened to be so damp and hot that all seeds started to sprout early, promising a good harvest, but one market day Ismail heard it said that locusts would perhaps come, as they had been noticed advancing from the south. This news caused him more curiosity than fear. For many years locusts had not invaded this village, so he was unable to understand why old people stroked their beards nervously saying, "May God preserve us!" Instead of asking what measures ought to be taken in case of invasion, he kept silence.

Two or three days after,—a hot day—he took a walk in his farm with his son Abbas. Raising his eyes, he remarked a single cloud coming from the south, although the wind was not blowing. A few minutes later the silver voice of his son was heard saying, "O father, look at the birds, the nice little yellow birds." The cloud coming near, appeared to separate into particles of small silver clouds hovering and shining under the sun. Ismail rubbed his

eyes and looked into the air once more and understood that it was the plague of locusts.

Father and son amused themselves for more than an hour looking at these insects whirling here and there. The boy caught some of them and soon a formidable multitude had passed by without stopping. "And then," said Ismail to himself, "they have come and gone without doing anything, what luck." But after a few minutes another cloud made its appearance. This time the multitude consisted of brown insects more disposed to make a short flight than hover over the place. The barley was soon covered with these insects and the man understood that he should get rid of them without loss of time. Father and son began to run from one place to another in the field with sticks or branches in their hands chasing the insects. They spent the whole morning in this manner until they heard their grandmother clapping her hands in a sign that the meal was ready. "So much the worse," exclaimed Ismail "let them remain in the barley for half an hour. Are you hungry my son? So am I." They went to take their meal and then came back to the farm. Complete tranquility reigned over the field and the

insects had stopped slipping and flying. Nothing happened to the barley but that some of the stems were half-eaten. The father took the son by the hand and they returned to their hut for rest.

After getting up from bed and smoking his pipe, he left the hut. The locusts had renewed their activities without doing harm; however, people said that they should be chased, so he started work. This time there was not much work, for he saw them quitting towards the north. He then sat down very pleased—as he had spent a busy day—that the second visit of the locusts had caused no damage to his farm.

All went well for three or four weeks. The sprouts grew and swelled up. The locusts disappeared and nothing was said about them. Ismail apparently had forgotten all about the locusts and their visit to his farm.

One day, on the path across his farm, he noticed some black spots on the ground as if tar had been poured out. With the end of his stick he touched one of these black spots, when a commotion ensued. He then discovered that it was not a nest of ants as

he believed, but that it was myriads of small locusts no bigger than gnats.

He easily found other places where small locusts were about to be hatched; they resembled black mud coming out of the cracks in the ground. He knocked on these places with his foot to drive into the ground these frightful germs of destruction but he succeeded only in scattering them and killing very few. He began to think what he should do and began to understand that his harvest was seriously threatened. It would have been easy for him to have asked the men in the market that day, and they would without doubt have given him good advice. Although he did not wish to consult those men in the market, he was obliged to go there to buy some meat, which was absolutely necessary for the approaching feast, and perchance he might learn something useful. Having bought the meat, he met some of his friends, and although he had decided to talk with them about his troubles, his tongue was fastened and he could not say anything. For he was too proud to confess his folly in allowing the locusts to remain long enough on his farm to lay eggs, which exposed him to blame, as

also he was too proud to ask how to get rid of them. "I shall think of some means," said he on his way back.

At the moment of coming to this decision, a young boy took hold of him shouting, "O, Sidi Ismail, blessed be God, I have found you. Your uncle, Sheikh El-Rebah, sent me to tell you that he is sick and wants to tell you something before he dies. If you are unable to come immediately, he requests you not to be too late, as what he is going to tell you is in your interest." Ismail took into consideration what he had just heard. The most important business of the day for him was the locusts and he had already neglected it quite long enough, but he felt very curious in regard to his uncle! Perhaps the Sheikh had the intention of bequeathing him some land? Or there might be the secret of a hidden treasure which his uncle intended to reveal to him. His uncle was an old man with no sons.

Should his troubles grow worse, it would be a regrettable thing not to have been able to learn of this good news, thought he, "the locusts are too small to-day to do any harm." He sent the meat home with the boy telling him to explain that he

was obliged to go to his uncle's house. Then, he started to walk for eight hours westward and reached the village of El-Rebah in the evening.

The Sheikh's room was packed with neighbours who were enquiring after him. Two hours had passed and Ismail noticed that they had the intention of sitting up with the old Sheikh who was respected and loved. Next day and the day following the same thing happened, visitors arriving continually. Ismail on more than one occasion tried to converse on the subject of locusts and to gather some suggestions without being obliged to ask for advice, but this subject was far from their minds and nobody took interest in such a discussion.

On the third day, towards sunset the old man cheered up a little and said, "Go to feast, my boys, it is not necessary to look after me this night. I feel a little better." When the hot soup was brought to him he found it to his taste, and after finishing it he covered himself with his burnous and slept peacefully. Ismail alone looked after him that night, by taking a seat close by his uncle's bed. The old man slept well and did not get up until next morning when everybody had started his work in the house

of Sheikh El Rebah. The old man then expressed a desire to sit in the sun in front of his door. The unlucky Ismail did not know what to do to overcome his impatience, as the nightmare of locusts was continually on his brain, and so he made up his mind to talk with his uncle when the latter had settled himself in the sun. "You wished to see me, O my uncle; I obeyed your order and have come, but I should return to my work."

"It is true, O my son," replied the old man, "had I been near to death I would have told you a good many things, but now, thanks to the Almighty, the bad turn has gone; I may perhaps live longer, but as circumstances may change I had better say nothing. If you are obliged to go, my benediction accompanies you." When he heard that, Ismail bade him farewell with a smile on his lips and anger in his heart.

He hurried back and returned early in the day to his farm. The path to his field was grayish. What did this mean? The small locusts in three days had become twice as large and marked with black and yellow and were in lines like an army, jumping all together in the same direction.

“That is all right,” said Ismail to himself, “they are about to go away.” Two kilometres of the path and the meadows on each side were frightfully covered with locusts and Ismail was struck with terror to find his farm, which appeared from a distance to be only slightly affected, was ruined. His farm, which had been full of green sprouts, had now turned black in one part and gray in another. The barley was eaten up to the roots, his harvest lost. But this was not all, for his neighbours were cursing him as their farms were also threatened with ruin through the locusts. They made complaint to the Cadi (Judge), who inflicted upon him a heavy fine, the payment of which swallowed up everything that he possessed, even to his burnous. He then started to work to earn bread for his family and to put aside a small sum for the future seed of his farm. This was rather hard on him, but it was the result of his carelessness and pride.

*
* *

There is a more terrible calamity than that of the locust. God says, “Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin.”

Listen, my brother. You allow an evil desire to reside in your heart— This desire may appear to have gone and you may forget it, but it leaves behind a dangerous nest of eggs which may develop and “bring forth sin.” And the sin may appear so insignificant as to cause no fear, just as the small locusts in the farm of Ismail. You may go on seeking the requirements of this world, leaving behind sin peacefully taking root in your heart and spoiling every bit of virtue, purity and justice you may possess. “When it hath conceived it bringeth forth death.” Yes, the death of your own harvest which you wished to gather to obtain a heavenly reward; the death of the harvest in the souls of your neighbours amongst whom you allowed the evil to spread.

The offspring of sin has already become difficult for you to make. You destroy one sin and miss thousands, just like the multitude of locusts. What remains for you to do?

Listen once more: Had Ismail been a wise man, he would have done two things: he would have confessed to his neighbours that he had allowed the locusts to lay eggs and he would also have asked how

to get rid of them. But neighbours cannot help you against the offspring of sin. Confess to God, for He alone can help you, even if your sins are as numerous as the hairs of your head. "Take with you words and turn to the Lord, say unto Him, Take away all iniquity and receive us graciously." Then you will be prepared to receive God's great benediction.

God has sent our Lord Jesus Christ to die for your sins, and in His tomb, if you so desire, your sins can be buried and never rise again. As to future sins, He can deliver you of these by means of His Spirit, which is compared to a wind. He can clear away from your heart, your soul and your desires all sins that surround you. He can also gather all products of the good seed which he soweth in your heart to his big harvest.

Is not this the blessing that you lack, O my brother? Tell God that you need it and it will soon be yours.



PTD. N. M. PRESS, CAIRO.