Excerpt from ***History of a Good Lord***

Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine
Translated from French by Jake Syersak and Zachary Anderson

The Good Lord was leaning against a column of cedarwood which had propped up, since time immemorial, the ceiling of this tavern that I used to frequent—like any man seeking pleasure, in spite of time and its tempests—to make my sad little life less empty. He was moistening a yellow cigarette butt that he had lit and crushed out a good many times. He was wearing tar-soaked rags and a pure white turban. This is, he told me once, the only thing that truly belongs to me; the one thing I wash every morning in the public fountain; good thing I ordered my minions to install fountains all over. The Good Lord reeked of urine, methylated spirits, and kif. He gave off a stench that was at once spiritual and putrid. I could barely stand this blanket of odors, but every word he spoke was like a breath of fresh air. The Good Lord haunted the city slums and didn't like to show his face anywhere else. The city itself was unusual. From the outset, it was divided into several distinct areas. Once, the Good Lord had constructed a zone for his own personal needs where no one—besides his inner circle—could go without feeling like there was a target on their back. At the time The Good Lord maintained a sensible police force, not to mention several hundred large, overfed dogs that he trained by his own hand to resemble mythological Cerberuses. The dogs roamed free. They fed on runts, old men, and sometimes even young people who couldn't defend themselves. The Good Lord's image was plastered everywhere, and the respectable subjects of his crown found they could easily approach him—in their dreams or in the street—and kiss his forehead, his pubis, or his toes. In return, The Good Lord would smile and let out a laugh that quaked the ramshackle homes of the poor, decrepit neighborhoods. He was embarrassed to see himself treated as the new Hercules, and he distrusted the notion. But as long as they keep thinking it, he told himself, who cares. He beat—and ordered others to beat—any busybody who wove anecdotes and flattering poems about him. That, he explained, is one of the reasons I've made it this far, and why I won't let anyone sing my praises—I pay highly-enlightened poets to do so. I knew The Good Lord in his best moments. Despite his offices, his guards, and his wealth, he seemed strangely alone. I told him so, and he seemed to understand. But most of the time he wore a grim expression and requested I take care of this or that on his behalf—things his state of absolute omnipotence would not permit him to handle personally. In the eyes of his subjects, I passed for a cunning pimp and shrewd businessman. People came to me by the thousands. To The Good Lord, whose most trustworthy advisor I had become, I reported everything that was going on in the city. If I were to disappear—he whispered in my ear during a late-night meeting attended by his dogs and his police—you would take my place. I trust no one else. Look around you—the men here are like spent reeds. They no longer produce any sound. Use them as you wish. I fear, however, that you won't fare as well as I have. But—given your intelligence, you should be able to get the better of these scum. Glory is not what we're after—we couldn't care less about that. We are above such things; What matters is crushing skulls, methodically and without thought or feeling, like figs fallen on the road. If they swear by your name, if they mistake you for one of my prophets, you will take the bastards by the balls and drive the busybodies to their knees. I have in a drawer a complete registry of repeat offenders, including the names and addresses of gravediggers and gossips. You will need no hospitals or ambulances—only donkeys. Raise as many donkeys as you can; you will need them. Make sure people die quickly enough to be replaced by donkeys. Time can wind back quickly, returning to the original spool. Before your death comes full circle, you must understand why you refer to yourself as The Good Lord. I will certainly not die. I have always been. I recall no day I

came to be. I am as I have always been, as you see me now: steadfast, consequential, the absolute master of reality and ruin; I will not advance—this is no administration, though I may have deemed several men worthy to be my mouthpiece. But what will happen, what is no doubt bound to happen, what is already happening, is this: *I am driven, by some deep transformation, to no longer desire anything at all*. Therefore you shall crown yourself in my glory and compel others to tremble before your image in place of mine. I've had enough! The Good Lord renounced his own dominion as expected. He left one beautiful morning without anyone noticing. At the time, I sat in awe on his throne, insisting that he had verbally bequeathed it to me; but in the end, I came to understand that I was not seated on a throne—there was none—only a heap of lies and conspiracies hatching all around me.

The Good Lord had stopped working. He spent the bulk of his time rummaging through others' trash. Of course, here and there he managed to unload the old things he collected. He turned grizzled, thin, and dirty. All the filth of the world had come crashing down on his shoulders. I wanted it that way, he told me. I invited him to drink to our decrepitude. He refused. However, his views had broadened considerably since he had fallen into destitution. He wanted to take matters back into his own hands. He had got it into his head that by shouting about who he was in public places, he could win the people over and appoint himself as The Good Lord a second time. I brought him to understand that he had lost his omnipotence. He shot back that he had most certainly lost it and that it was still possible for him to retrieve it. He was unable to lug his files around with him everywhere he went. No doubt, over his long spells of vagrancy, he lost many of them. He begged me to help him get his thoughts in order. No, no, I've become a poet since you left; I don't want to hear any more about dominion over this, dominion over that. That was precisely when he showed me that he, too, was a poet. From the pocket of his overcoat, he pulled out a bundle of gray sheets on which he had copied out the poem of his life. I took the manuscript, congratulating him. It was the best work The Good Lord had ever done. While I was looking it over, he disappeared. No matter! While he is out of the picture we shall go over this remarkable text, together:

In the name of myself and of those who no longer believe in me; in the name of typhoid, migraines, jaundice, cysts, neurasthenia, colic, delirium tremens, the fear that I inspired in them, the disillusionments, servile wars, blackmailers, busybodies, chameleons, the phosphates I rarely managed to sell, riots, the comet-dust of my absurd ideas, floor by floor down to my motionless depths, the vast façades of buildings repainted over the course of my tale, I begin my notorious story without omitting anything that would throw the purpose of my writing off course. But if there is a purpose to which I aspire, I will not attain it. The purpose is no more and no less than to define my bitterness, tormented by prior conduct. Curses befall me if any of my history reads incomplete. Had I wished it, I could have saved it for the crematorium. I don't know how to kill like I used to. In the past, I would rip out my dogs' teeth and fix them to my own, to form a crueler bite. I'd lost my own—spat them into a gutter one night. It's impossible for me—or anyone without teeth like those—to reclaim what's lost. Nevertheless, I remain reasonably confident in my abilities. But this is not the central concern of my writing, there's no question of interceding with anyone: I lay claim to nothing and need no drugs. Naturally, I will come to the true subject of this conversation swirling inside my head. I will recount my life and listen to it as I write. But since I have always detested grandiloquence and drawn-out prefaces—especially while trying to uphold something at once

important and improbable—I will tear up the various accounts I've written, for they are, to be honest, merely an extended introduction to my life. First, I began by banishing from my mind the idea of a continuous, absolute reign based on exaggerated omnipotence. Then I took my place, as one ought, like anyone else would, on what had been erected for and by me. And thus my reign was established, all doubts swept aside. But this was only a semblance of what was, because nothing had been erased entirely; everything had contracted inward, curling into the flesh of the senses and labyrinthine thought—so that I might avoid embarrassment, or fear. I rewarded, at great cost, anyone who could maintain my disorder. Indeed, that was the gravest mistake I made. But several miscalculations and wayward ventures aside, something very strange occurred. Something inexpressible, for which it will be difficult to provide explanation. Know this: I am my own master. I would not rest until everything dissolved into my echo. And therein lies my true ruin. Once I realized this, I abandoned the authentic course of my designs and handed the keys of my superiority over to the first one I came across. I no longer cared. I witnessed myself, for the umpteenth time, teetering on the edge, and despite the fruits of my labor (inasmuch as men are also trees), I could no longer taste the minutest sweetness of the world. I took up the lyre and clay pipe. I drew in a long breath and let it out, adjusting the collar of my shirt. Good and evil coexisted within me. I had allowed my reign, my so-called *reignitude*, to collapse. I wanted to compose the poem I had long dreamed of: this would be my one true creation, to be passed on to whomsoever I chose.

I've known every twisted path, every beating and betrayal, every hanging and act of violence (lawful or otherwise) there is, every way to pry loose a tooth, to unmoor an organ—and I've known the engorgements that come with dawn and creative procreation; while everyone was asleep, I went to work on the world, starting with its navel. Was I successful? Could I be? I ruled with an iron fist over the poor, and people of faith. I made them bleed. I locked up any man, woman, or child who wanted nothing to do with me. I violated everything and everyone and in every way I pleased, ignoring anything that mattered. I reduced the truth to ashes and gave pride of place to lies, absurdity, and all-out-madness. If I felt like laughing but couldn't bring myself to, others would laugh for me, and sometimes it would make me smile. Everyone had to echo every word I said to their last breath. I had my flowers watered every hour, on the hour, day and night. I drained the courage from anyone who encountered me. I twisted the minds of those who looked me in the eye. I elevated the snake charmers and agents of chaos to positions of wealth and power. I had no use for moderation. I had no cock—slowly but surely I shaved it away with a straight-razor. It withered into a coil against my testicles and then disappeared completely. I raised countless donkeys. I ordered my minions to parade in the nude before me. I tied nooses around the necks of anyone who opposed my regime. I doused the chicken coops and wheat fields in gasoline to orchestrate a famine. Ultimately, I wanted to be the last one standing amid the ruins of my own making. I drank myself sick on the stars, on mescaline diluted in menstrual blood, on donkey's milk. I was strong, copper-skinned, cotton-soft, feather-light, slithering, and sly. I had everything I needed to be at peace, to live out a serene and uncomplicated life. What followed was anything but. My dominion waned in its shadow. Moreover, it suited no one.

As for what followed, what can be said? Except that I knew the very best the city had to offer: the beggars, the street-sweeps, the prostitutes, the delinquents, the water-carriers, the angelic little girls sitting on doorsteps that are not their own, the repugnant merchants so grease- and greed-

ridden you'd think they were out to earn ten lifetimes' worth at once, the corn-grillers, the singers, and the overwhelming spirit of *folklorité,* whose major flaws I could make out without too much trouble…I lived in a shack down near the port. I did not work. I had no need for money. I kept company with fishermen, thieves, and taxi drivers. From time to time, they would pick up my bar tab, and in return, I would offer them some words of wisdom—for example, how it had dawned on me to create the world around us. Revelation. Day One. Discovery of Man and Thirst. Womb of Woman. They leaned closer with every word I said. They did not insult me—well, yes, an old bearded man once did. Specifically, he said that the world was made by someone else and, in order to prove it, all one needed to do was watch the sunrise. Which I did not do. There's no need, now, to repeat all that. I don't have the strength, I can't even pretend to be anything anymore. I would do better living out the rest of my days in silence.

At the threshold of middle age, I found myself confronted with a circus no less absurd than the silencing of an entire people condemned to live out their daily torment—a torment that brought about nothing but never-ending hunger. I resolved to prey systematically on the weakest among them, those least capable of saving themselves when danger reared its head. I left a wake of devastation—even the earth seemed to suffer as I carved my path through it, my instruments of destruction reducing it to smithereens. My scent rose into the air, rising like a storm. Some of the surviving witnesses believed that my actions were intended to save them. It took someone like me to take on the total demystification of this little world, whose sole foundation I had now become. I led, like those I had no qualms laying waste to, a contradictory existence. I could be found by turns in luxurious private rooms and tents overflowing with waste. I could go a long time without food, but I couldn't bear a moment of thirst. I slaked my thirst with vinegar and—as a special treat—the tears of my women. I had no harem, unlike that barbarian king that I'd recently done away with; neither was I married, but would sleep with all the women I surrounded myself with at once, my sex having now multiplied. With famine as their ally, my men spun their little tales, which could barely pass as History. I referred to my actions as metaphysical cock-and-bull stories. In truth, I worked alone, but a crew well-versed in all kinds of murderous tactics was at my bidding. I, the First Guinea Pig, inherited from my parents a resilience without equal. I had studied everything, even what was never taught and was taken as myth. But then—how dare you take advantage of those who weaned you, fed you, crowned you, freed you from doubt? How resign them to the fate you have in mind? I am not in the habit of answering my own questions. Never did I walk around with holes in my trousers—I had multiple pairs on hand; I treated myself to two suits per week. I wore them for as long as it pleased me to do so. The moment anyone found fault, I would pull them out of my closet, make a pile, and set them on fire. Then do it all again. My classmates were certainly more astute than I was; intelligence did not escape me—it is congenital. I rushed through my assignments, but I was not without a certain know-how; I even managed to fool my teachers. They agreed to remain silent about my shortcomings; in return, I gave them my word that they would be properly welcomed into my house. I never followed through. What goes around has come around; and I am no longer one to turn the other cheek. To my fellow believers, who were willing to fan the flames in order to smooth my ascent, I granted positions of prestige. Their leader is strong, like a hyena. He gave free rein to his rage, which rivals my own (it pains me to admit it); yet his rage casts a shadow—small but suffocating—over the horizon of his ambitions. If he'd had any sense, he would've have wiped out every other opposing force and then used my own to try and bring me down. His mistakes are not comparable to mine. Mine are legitimate, and that's what illusionists of his kind do not understand. His are unforgivable. Now is the time to appeal to anyone and everyone. I tell myself this over and

over, but the obscurity of my designs consumes me. I've imposed my own will too hard, unsettled some too much and others too little. No—it's true—I can grant voice only to those who support me—and whom I fear. What is a throne? No—not a pyramid. A pyramid is scientifically unshakeable, while a throne is spun from myth and war after never-ending war.

But what does that mean? Absolute prohibition on certain words. No clear definitions, no bringing things to light, no standing one's ground, no juxtaposition, no comparison, no drawing conclusions, no critiquing. One flounders. The swamp swallows you as you take your seat on the crocodile's jaw. The very one you brought into existence to save your own skin. You begin by outlining its teeth, then its gums. Then you go into exile, but it's not over. The exile forgets everything, even the beatings. You lament and worry to your core. You are increasingly exposed, stripped of your essence. Nothing is sacred for an exile. Strangers from a faraway land taught you to polish their shoes. Gradually awakening the man in you, sometimes mistreating you as needed. Maybe you lingered too long over this or that cause, old rumors, the black fountains, and structures that shaped you. You know nothing; worse, you rebel against your own intuitions. The old gods were no greater than you, but they were as beloved as vagabonds. They would have shown you the way out, the passage that carried you beyond your biological limits. Otherwise, you would have been devoured by the beasts of the earth. This is what separates you from you. Danger stirs your blood. You transform from ape to man in one leap. But inside, you remain 90% beast. One blow would take you down. It was the rain. Perhaps the wind was fanning the flames. You leave myth in the dust. Now you can't look yourself in the mirror without sneering. You are the one performing the operation. You open your stomach, find nothing, close it again, and begin to contemplate. You come to a halt under a sun that tells you: "Get lost." So you do. Again. You take an aimless, circuitous route. Turn by turn, you come into yourself. You spin in circles in place, never delving any deeper. Never taking notice of yourself. Your words roll around in the sand, expel you, reconstrue your waste, and look you over. They burst, they splatter against your face like bird droppings. They take your place to create a greater sense of objectivity. But not because you are a solid body.

