

## Beirut Claims back its only patron saint

*On Wednesday the English people celebrated their patron saint, St George. But the real St George lived in Beirut and so did the dragon he slayed. This extract from the book Al-Nas Bin-Nas by Salam Al Rassi explains that the legendary figure is still part of the lives of the Lebanese people, Christians and Muslims who revere him equally. The Christians call him St George and Muslims call him Al-Khadhr. Hanna H. Farha*

My Uncle Makhoul did not believe in fate. He always used to say; "A man can only reap what he sows", while my other uncle Abu Saadah declared that "Man cannot choose his destiny, everything is written". When Abu Saadah's wife decided one stormy day to go to the neighboring village Abu Qmaha, to fulfil her vows at St George's church, Uncle Abu Saadah did not stop her, saying: "Let her go. She'll get whatever fate has decided for her."

When she failed to show up after dark, he didn't go out to look for her, but confessed quietly his concern to me, "Perhaps she has fallen prey to Abu Amer the hyena."

She finally arrived, completely soaked, to tell us her dramatic adventure of how she was followed all the way by Abu Amer although 'he' kept a distance. She was convinced that the hyena did not get close to her because 'Mar Jiryis' or St George, was guarding her all the way her from the church to the footsteps of her house.

Since then, the image of St George has glittered in our imagination. From childhood, we have believed in his power; our own personal protector against all harm: hyenas, thieves and evil eyes - he was our patron saint.

Years later, when the civil war in Lebanon broke out and spread to Mina Al Hosn, all the hotels there, including the St George Hotel were converted into barricades. One day I went to see a friend who lived in that area. After greeting him amidst the din of cannon and rockets he looked at me and said sarcastically: "It seems that this battle is between St George on one side and Al Khadhr on the other."

The next day when I saw smoke coming from the area, I went to check on my friend. After a very long search I found him sitting with his relatives and friends in the basement of an old house. So, I asked, "Tell me my friend, who won the battle, St George or Al Khadr?"

"Unfortunately the dragon," he replied from amongst the rubble.

From the book An-Nas Bin-Nas by Salam Al Rassi. Translated and adapted to English by Hanna H. Farha, 1

*St George ('Mar Jiryis' in Arabic, also known to Muslims as 'al-Khadr', the Green One, was a true Lebanese citizen who used to live in Mina Al-Hosn, in Beirut, in the same place where the St George Hotel was later built.*

*During that time, a dragon would periodically terrorise the city's inhabitants. The people pleaded to their ruler to give in to the creature's demand for the surrender of his daughter as the price for the city's freedom.*

*As the princess to be sacrificed left the Bab El Serail (east) gate of the city walls, St George rescued her and killed the dragon near the gulf which carries his name up to this day.*

*For this reason, St George (or Al khadr) is considered the only national saint for all the citizens of Lebanon both Muslims and Christians.*

*The key to the mystery of St George's adoption by the English is probably Christianity and the Crusaders' presence in this region. It is generally thought that the real St George was born in Lydda, Palestine, rose to high rank in the Roman army in which he served in Britain, became a distinguished Christian, and was martyred under Diocletian, on April 23, 203 AD, still celebrated as St George's Day in England, after Edward III proclaimed him patron saint.*

*But it was not until the fourth AD century AD that the first Lebanese monument was erected in the martyr's honour. The mother of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, erected a small white marble column in an early Byzantine chapel on the spot where the dragon was slain. The Crusaders built a large chapel, which was adapted into a mosque in 1661. Now the Mosque of al-Khadr, still contains remains of the 12th century Crusader chapel.*