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AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOME
OF THE STORIES
OF HANA TAHR
IN TRANSLATION
WITH A CRITICAL
INTRODUCTION

BY
ANNE MUGLA PARSONS

DECEMBER 1991

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“AN ANTHOLOGY OF SOME OF THE STORIES OF BAHĀ' TĀHIR
IN TRANSLATION
WITH A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.”

NC

A Thesis Submitted To The Faculty Of The Center For
Arabic Studies Of The American University In Cairo
In Partial Fulfilment Of The Requirements For
The Degree Of Master Of Arts.

Thesis
1998/987

BY ANNE NICOLA PARSONS

DECEMBER 1991.


THIS THESIS FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE

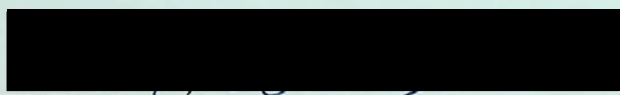
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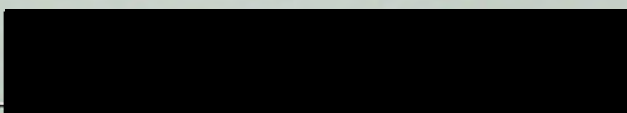
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MAY 1992


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READER, THESIS COMMITTEE


READER, THESIS COMMITTEE


CHAIRMAN, DEPARTMENT OF ARABIC STUDIES

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This Thesis For The Master of Arts Degree
in Modern Arabic Studies

By Anne Nicola Parsons

Written in December 1991

has been approved

Chairman of the Thesis Committee

Thesis Reader

Thesis Reader

Chairman of the Department of Arabic Studies

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PREFACE

To read Egyptian literature for someone who is unfamiliar with Egypt is somewhat like opening all the doors and windows of a house to let light flood into darkness and to contemplate the scene outside. The darkness inside corresponds to ignorance and lack of understanding of Egyptians and their culture; the light corresponds to Egyptian literature which gives one a new insight into, and a deeper comprehension of Egyptian people and the society in which they live. Reading Egyptian literature has personally given me many hours of pleasure and enabled me to make discoveries and observations which my own limited brain could never have managed for itself!

Bahā' Ṭāhir is one Egyptian author whose stories caught my particular attention, due to his penetrating insight into the minds, customs and struggles of his people and the skilful way in which he presents his ideas and perceptions to his readers. He stands out as one of the most gifted authors of the 1960's generation and has worked hard to improve the quality of Egyptian literature being published. As such the author of this thesis feels that he is worthy of special recognition which has hitherto not been given to him.

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold. Firstly it is my desire to give the non-Arabic speaker the opportunity of taking a fresh glimpse into various aspects of Egyptian life. I propose to translate four short stories by Bahā' Ṭāhir which I feel will be of particular interest to the foreign reader seeking to understand Egyptian people and their culture. The stories which I have chosen complement already existing translations which enable any foreigner who so desires to obtain a well-rounded picture of life in Egypt and an in-depth knowledge of Egyptian people from a variety of different backgrounds.

Secondly it is my desire to give Bahā' Ṭāhir the tribute which he deserves for the important contribution he has made to the development of literature in Egypt. Though Bahā' Ṭāhir has not produced an abundance of short stories and novels, the three short story collections and three novels which he has written are of very high quality. I propose to give a critical assessment of his work and to put it in context with that of his contemporaries.

I have chosen to discuss the four short stories "*alKhuṭūba*" (The Engagement), "*Sundus*", "*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*" (The Trial of the Priest Kāy-Nan), and "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*" (A Hill-Top Discussion.) These stories have been selected firstly to show how Bahā' Ṭāhir's writing has developed throughout his career as a writer. Secondly they have been chosen because each story deals with the dynamics of relationships, whether between individuals or groups of people. Bahā' Ṭāhir seeks to reform and improve those relationships. "The Engagement" deals with the relationship between two people of different generations, the traditional and the modern, the differing values of those two people and how those values affect the way in which they relate to one another. "Sundus" deals with the relationship between a villager and a social outcast. The relationship of the two is affected not only by social conditioning, but also by the superstitious beliefs that are widespread amongst the poorer, less educated classes in Egypt. "The Trial of the Priest Kāy-Nan" handles the relationship between the Egyptian government and the people, contrasting Nasser's regime with that of Sadat and outlining how the Egyptian people responded to those two different regimes. "A Hill-Top Discussion" examines the relationship of the individual with the society in which he lives.

There is an element of oppression and abuse in each of the four stories; it is this side of society which Bahā' Ṭāhir seeks to reform. In "The Engagement" the father's outdated traditions cause him to emotionally manipulate and blackmail a prospective husband for his daughter. In "Sundus", Umm Idrīs refuses to show love or compassion towards Sundus because she is an outcast of society and therefore untrustworthy. Sundus in turn manipulates Umm Idrīs into buying her wares, motivated by a desperate need for financial support. In "The Trial of the Priest Kāy-Nan", the ruling priests torture and oppress the priest Kāy -Nan because his different religious beliefs constitute a threat to their own political stability. In "A Hill-Top Discussion" the grey-haired man uses and abuses ʿAbbās and Hānim because of his warped philosophy of life. The story reflects the negative influence the West has had on Egypt with its selfish, individualistic theories on life. Reformation in these stories is to be brought about, not only through a change in the oppressor's attitudes, but also through a change in those who are passive recipients of oppression. They are to stand up for what is right.

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part 1 consists of a critical introduction. In chapter one I have outlined the history of the short story in Egypt from the beginning of the 1950's and explained how Bahā' Ṭāhir fits into the overall picture. Chapter two contains a short biography of Bahā' Ṭāhir's life and work as a whole. Chapter three consists of a critical analysis of the four short stories which I have chosen to translate. Part 2 contains the translations of the short stories "*al-Khuṭūba*", "*Sundus*", "*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*" and "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*."

In conclusion I would like to thank all the staff at the American University in Cairo who have helped me during my time at the university. In particular I would like to give special thanks to Dr. Sakkut and Dr. Brairari for their patience, kindness and wisdom without which I would never have been able to complete this thesis and to the library staff for their assistance and co-operation. Finally I would like to thank my room-mate, Marisela, for her endurance of long hours of loneliness whilst I finished this, and her much-needed encouragement to keep me going!

PART I: A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE SHORT STORY IN EGYPT FROM
THE BEGINNING OF THE 1950'S.

"The short story is the youngest literary genre in both Egyptian literature and world literature" as a whole. In Egypt its history can be divided into four stages: the embryonic stage, starting around the end of the nineteenth century up until 1914; the initial stage, from around 1914 until 1924; the formative stage, from 1925 up until the middle of the 1930's; and the mature mature stage, from the mid 1930's up until the present day. It is with this last stage that this chapter is concerned, since it is into this last period that Bahā' Taher's writings fit.

CHAPTER 1

A HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SHORT STORY IN EGYPT FROM THE BEGINNING OF THE 1950's.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the short story in Egypt was accepted even more hesitantly than the novel. However, the situation has changed dramatically so that now the short story in Egypt enjoys a great deal of popularity. Indeed it is "by far the most popular of the literary genres" (1). The short story in Egypt in the last half century has been the result of prevailing political and social conditions. When the hearts of Egyptians have overflowed with hope at the prospect of a new and better political system which will bring about better social conditions, literary activity has flourished. When Egyptian dreams have been crushed by military defeat and by a police and a political regime, literary activity has declined.

At the start of the 1950's the short story was on the verge of entering a new, mature stage of development. Great efforts had been made to improve the standard of this type of literature. In 1939 "Nad al-Qah" (The Story Club) had been founded with the aim of developing Egyptian fiction. The club did much to enhance the quality of short stories being written at this time. It published a short story book every month, delivered lectures on the art of story-writing, and offered prizes for the best stories in competitions. Clubs also had a major part in improving the short stories being written. Coupled with this, the 1952 revolution brought the Egyptian people with new hope for a better life. The intellectuals of this period were keen to play their part in the development of a more just society where people worked for a common good, living together in unity and harmony. These intellectuals worked avidly to produce a new kind of literature which expressed the hopes, fears, dreams and realities of their generation.

"The short story is the youngest literary genre in both Egyptian literature and world literature" as a whole.¹ In Egypt its history can be divided into four stages: the embryonic stage, starting around the end of the nineteenth century up until 1914; the trial stage, from around 1914 until 1924; the formative stage, from 1925 up until the middle of the 1950's² and the more mature stage, from the mid 1950's up until the present day. It is with this last stage that this chapter is concerned, since it is into this last period that Bahā' Ṭāhir's writings fit.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the short story in Egypt was accepted even more hesitantly than the novel. However, that early trend has changed dramatically so that now the short story in Egypt enjoys unprecedented popularity. Indeed it is "by far the most popular of the literary genres published in the Arab world today".³ This achievement is for the most part due to increased numbers of Arabic periodicals and daily papers which publish short stories. The fluctuating success of the short story throughout the past half century has been the result of prevailing political and social conditions. When the hearts of Egyptians have overflowed with hope at the prospect of a new and better political system which will bring about better social conditions, literary activity has increased. When Egyptians' dreams have been smashed by military defeat and an oppressive political regime, literary activity has declined.

At the start of the 1950's the short story was on the verge of entering a new, maturer stage of development. Great efforts had been made to improve the standard of this type of literature. In 1950 "Nādī al-Qiṣṣa" (The Story Club) had been founded with the aim of developing Egyptian fiction. The club did much to enhance the quality of short stories being written at this time. It published a short story book every month, delivered lectures on the art of story-writing, and offered prizes for the best stories in competitions. Critics also had a major part in improving the short stories being written.⁴ Coupled with this, the 1952 revolution filled the Egyptian people with new hope for a better life. The intellectuals of this period were keen to play their part in the development of a more just society where people worked towards a common good, living together in unity and harmony. Thus the intellectuals worked avidly to produce a new kind of literature which expressed the hopes, frustrations and realities of their generation.

The new emphasis on literary activity of an improved quality brought about a new style in the short stories being written. Hitherto stories had tended to be written in an elaborate style at the expense of the actual theme of the story. The result had been that the main idea of the story had often been lost. In the 1950's a new narrative style evolved which was simple, descriptive and free from verbosity and artificiality. The style aimed at economy of words and lucidity of expression. Though not yet perfected, it was a great improvement on its predecessor.⁵

The stories of the 1950's and early 1960's were full of social realism. They handled such themes as poverty and the exploitation of the poor on the part of the rich; how tradition fettered people and prevented the development and modernisation of Egypt; political and social injustice; family problems such as the relationship of husband and wife and the tension between parent and child. Major writers of this period who played an important part in the development of this new kind of literature which had such a significant role to play in the social and political change which was taking place included such people as Najīb Maḥfūz, Yūsuf Idrīs, Yūsuf al-Shārūnī and Yaḥyā Haqqī.

The 1960's witnessed a further increase in literary activity coupled with a further development in the novels and the short stories being written. The literary works written at this time represent the generation's documentation of the changing civilization of which it was a witness. The 1960's authors had experienced an enormous political upheaval under Nasser's rule and this is expressed in their predominantly politically-orientated short stories. They write about the contradiction between what positive things the revolution had achieved on a social level and what negative things had emerged on an individual level.⁶ On the one hand great advances had been made in education, industrialisation, land reclamation and in huge projects such as the Aswan Dam, yet on the other hand, many regressive steps had been taken. Human rights theories were abandoned, intellectuals were restricted, arrested and some were sent to detention camps.⁷ The final blow came with the 1967 defeat when an already discouraged literary world was driven to despair. The writers of this period all express a violent desire to create a new beginning and search for a new way of life, far away from their old visions, concepts and values.⁸

During the 1960's there was no one particular school of thought regarding how short stories should be written. Everyone had his own way to write. Authors experimented with new forms, writing in response to what was going on in Egyptian society at that time. The authors' experiments reflected the experiments of Egyptian society in the 1960's. Short stories reached new horizons without breaking totally away from traditional forms.⁹ Sometimes the stories employed fantasy to express the themes they wanted to portray. Writers wrote in a refined, artistic language which was bold and clear, piercing whilst at the same time being concise and simple. Authors of the 1960's continued to lean towards a close study of the characters themselves without paying so much attention to the action or plot. Action was limited to that which would reveal what was in the hearts of the characters. The stories described insignificant incidents though they contained a wealth of meaning beneath the surface.

The exemplary hero disappeared during the 1960's. He was replaced by a confused, disinterested hero who was more suited to express the estrangement, alienation and futility which was felt by the intellectuals during this period. The heroes lived in a world of their own, having abandoned any ambition to play an active role in the society around them. They led superficial, materialistic lives in passive acceptance of the political and social turmoil around them.

The themes, character portrayal and style of Najīb Maḥfūẓ's generation had a great influence on the following generation including such authors as Ibrāhīm Aṣṣalān, Sun Allāh Ibrāhīm, ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim, Luṭfī al-Khulī and Bahā' Ṭāhir. However, this generation developed their own particular style, reaching beyond the bounds of social realism. Their writing had a new sensitivity to it. It had a realism that went deeper than all other kinds, one which realized that mankind has limits that he's not yet reached and that it is only through art that those limits can be reached.¹⁰ Good, truth and beauty are no longer part of reality in the short stories of the new generation, rather they can only be discovered outside reality.¹¹ Thus the new authors turn to myths and symbolic mystery to express their longing and hope for a new world with a new type of people, better than those found in reality.

The new generation, like its predecessors, depicted the Egyptian person with all his fears, frustrations and the afflictions he suffered which caused him to adopt his passive stance to life, overcome with a feeling of complete inability to bring about change either in his life or others. However, they came to the realization that it is not just the world or society which causes man's problems, rather it is also man's inner soul.

The value of this new generation's short stories lay particularly in their style. The authors continued to experiment with new forms and techniques, rejecting traditional short story forms. Their philosophy of time and place changed. Time was no longer linear and the place was not necessarily realistic, it rather symbolized the inner state of the hero and helped him to discover what was going on inside of him.¹² Often the ending of the story was not the one that was expected.

The late 1960's and 1970's in Egypt witnessed a literary decline for political, social and economic reasons. The literary world became disillusioned as its hopes for a better society slowly dwindled until the 1967 defeat demonstrated the indisputable weaknesses of Nasser's regime. Both Nasser and then Sadat maintained strict censorship over all literary activity throughout the period. In general however, writers tended to be highly supportive of Nasser's socialist theories whereas they intensely disliked Sadat's reversal back to capitalism. The decline during this period was thus due partly to disillusionment following the 1967 defeat and then due to the fact that censorship prevented the writers from publishing the kind of stories they wanted to. Some authors published their work in other Arab countries. Many of Egypt's intellectuals left Egypt altogether.

The vision of the 1970's authors is nightmarish. They were all born around 1944-1950. They are "children of the revolution who were brought up on slogans of socialism and Arab glory and then suffered the collapse of 1967 at a critical period of their youth. They came to maturity at a time of terrible frustration, contradictions and an almost total reversal of the socialist ethic of the previous decade."¹³ "Their work conveys a sense of frustration, futility and protest masked as indifference."¹⁴

The '70's generation's work could be labelled as the literature of the absurd. The writers are known as "The New Romantics". The most astonishing characteristic of their work is the absolute passivity with which they write. They remain neutral in the face of extreme tragedy. They do not weep over what has been lost. The writers of this generation deal with things superficially and do not go into any depth. They reflect from afar, seeking to challenge and reform the society in which they live. The language which they use, though cold and unemotional,¹⁵ is nevertheless rich in suggestion and symbolism.

Bahā' Ṭāhir's short story collections reflect the themes with which the writers of all his generation dealt. However, it can be said that Bahā' Ṭāhir has a wider vision than many of his contemporaries. That vision begins in the heart of Egypt, in the Egyptian village. "Sundus", "Khālṭī Ṣafīya wa-al-Dayr" and "Sharq al-Nakhīl" all show Bahā' Ṭāhir's penetrating insight into life in Egyptian villages. Bahā' Ṭāhir's vision then moves out from the village and into Cairo, where he outlines some of the social problems of modern-day city life: drug addiction, male-female relationships, traditional views in conflict with modern views and the housing crisis, to name a few. At a national level Bahā' Ṭāhir deals with historical events which have scarred the hearts of all Egyptians in contemporary Egypt. In "Qālat Ḍuḥā" he pictures Nasser's regime with all its glories and ignomies; "Sharq al-Nakhīl" portrays the 1967 defeat; "Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan" compares Nasser's regime to that of Sadat's. Finally Bahā' Ṭāhir's vision moves to the international scene where he describes the experiences of Egyptians living in the West. "Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k" is unmatched in its honest analysis of the problems faced by Egyptians living abroad. Bahā' Ṭāhir has shown a remarkable objectivity in his description. Bahā's emigration to the West has given him an insight which his predecessors, writing on the same theme, did not demonstrate. Bahā' Ṭāhir shows a sensitivity towards the plight of Westerners in "Fī Ḥadīqa Ghayr 'Ādīyya" which previous Egyptian literature has not shown.

Bahā' Ṭāhir's heroes depict the plight of the modern Egyptian intellectual. They are characteristic of the heroes of Bahā' Ṭāhir's generation. They are ordinary people, often well-educated, middle-class, government employees. At the beginning of Bahā' Ṭāhir's stories the heroes are disillusioned with life. The frustration the heroes feel, rooted in their inability to achieve their ambitions or dreams, has driven them to a life of passivity and boredom which has no value or meaning. The heroes of Bahā' Ṭāhir's later short stories in particular, show that it is possible within the small space of a short story, to nevertheless produce well-rounded, realistic characters.

The earlier short stories of Bahā' Ṭāhir are characterized by a "new style", later adopted and adapted by the '70's generation. Bahā' Ṭāhir uses short sentences which are nevertheless rich in meaning. Unlike many others, he does not concern himself with form or technique to give his stories value and he thereby avoids obscurity. Bahā' Ṭāhir's world is simple and

familiar, yet at the same time like a horror film. Later Bahā' Tāhir was a prime innovator of the new style of writing which came into existence towards the end of the 1960's. He began to shift in his stories from reality to mystery, maximizing the use of the symbolic as a powerful mode of expression. Bahā' Tāhir developed a poetical, descriptive style of a very high quality.

Thus it can be said that Bahā' Tāhir has contributed to the development of Arabic literature in a two-fold way. Firstly he has contributed by the variety of themes about which he has written, offering a deep and perceptive insight into contemporary Egypt, into the lives of contemporary Egyptians both in Egypt and in the West, and into recent historical events which have contributed to the moulding of contemporary Egypt and Egyptians. Secondly Bahā' Tāhir has been one of the innovators of the new style of writing which has placed Egyptian literature firmly into its mature stage of development. Bahā' Tāhir's work is an example and a challenge to all modern Egyptian authors to keep on developing and improving their work, to experiment with new styles and to freely express what is in their hearts that they might model a better society for the future. It is evident that Bahā' Tāhir is one of the best writers of the 1960's generation in Egypt.¹⁶ Indeed Aḥmad al-Shahāwi claims he is one of the best writers over the whole Arab world.¹⁷

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CHAPTER 2

A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF BAHÁ' TÁHIR'S LIFE AND WORK

Bahā' Tahir was born in Giza in 1915. His parents were originally from Karnak in Upper Egypt. Bahā' Tahir's father first came to Cairo in order to pursue a higher education at Liḥ al-ʿIlm. After he graduated, Bahā' Tahir's father married and he and his wife lived in various different cities until they finally settled in Giza. They had eight children; five sons, of whom Bahā' was the youngest, and three daughters. When Bahā' was still only five years old, his father retired at the age of sixty from his career as an Arabic teacher. This means that the family had very little money off which they could live. Nevertheless, who is many poor parents might have cut back on expenditure by

CHAPTER 2

A BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT OF BAHĀ' TĀHIR'S

LIFE AND WORK

Bahā' completed his primary school in Giza. Following this he spent a year at a government school. Even at school Bahā' Tahir's talent for writing was evident in the excellent compositions which he wrote. In 1932 Bahā' Tahir entered Cairo University to study for a Bachelor's degree in History, which he successfully obtained in 1935.

There were other experiences in Bahā' Tahir's life which had as much of an impact on him as his formal education in school. These experiences revolved around the home environment in which Bahā' was raised. Bahā' Tahir's mother ensured that he developed a clear understanding of and familiarity with village life. He wrote: "My village was my mother". She kept up her village ways until the day she died in 1953, never changing her accent or her customs. The never-ending stream of visitors from Upper Egypt which passed through the family home in Giza would reinforce the impressions which Bahā' Tahir's mother had left in his mind. The visits which Bahā' made to his parents' village in Karnak confirmed and complemented all that he had learned at home in Giza. Bahā' Tahir's mother never tired of telling her children stories of her life and family back in Karnak. It was from his mother that Bahā' first acquired a love for stories, and from her that he took his first lessons in the art of story-telling.

A year before his graduation in 1936, Bahā' Tahir began to work as a translator in the State Department of Information. He continued to do this until he passed an exam for the job of broadcaster, translator and editor for the National Broadcasting Company. Bahā' Tahir

Bahā' Ṭāhir was born in Giza in 1935. His parents were originally from Karnak in Upper Egypt. Bahā' Ṭāhir's father first came to Cairo in order to pursue a higher education at Dār al-ʿUlūm. After he graduated, Bahā's father married and he and his wife lived in various different cities until they finally settled in Gīza. They had eight children; five sons, of whom Bahā' was the youngest, and three daughters. When Bahā' was still only five years old, his father retired at the age of sixty from his career as an Arabic teacher. This meant that the family had very little money off which they could live. Nevertheless, where many poor parents might have cut back on expenditure by keeping their children out of school, this was not so with Bahā's parents. They were determined to give their children a full education. Thus, from 1940 to 1943 Bahā' Ṭāhir attended the local government school in Gīza. Following this he spent a year at Qurānic school, where he memorized part of the Qurān. Between 1944 and 1952 Bahā' completed his primary and secondary education at the government school. Even at school Bahā's talent for writing was evident in the excellent compositions which he wrote. In 1952 Bahā' Ṭāhir entered Cairo University to study for a Bachelor's degree in history, which he successfully obtained in 1956.¹

There were other experiences in Bahā' Ṭāhir's life which had no less of an impact on him than his formal education in school. Those experiences centred around the home environment in which Bahā' was raised. Bahā' Ṭāhir's mother ensured that he developed a clear understanding of and familiarity with village life. He wrote:- "My village was my mother"². She kept up her village ways until the day she died in 1983, never changing her accent or her customs. The never-ending stream of visitors from Upper Egypt which passed through the family home in Gīza would re-inforce the impressions which Bahā's mother had left in his mind. The visits which Bahā' made to his parents' village in Karnak confirmed and complemented all that he had learned at home in Gīza. Bahā's mother never tired of telling her children stories of her life and family back in Karnak. It was from his mother that Bahā' first acquired a love for stories, and from her that he took his first lessons in the art of storytelling.

A year before his graduation in 1956, Bahā' Ṭāhir began to work as a translator in the State Department of Information. He continued to do this until he passed an exam for the job of broadcaster, translator and editor for the National Broadcasting Company.³ Bahā' Ṭāhir

assisted in setting up the new Radio 2 station. The station presented artistic and cultural programmes, bringing the best international literature to the Egyptian people. There is no doubt that these early years with the broadcasting company gave Bahā' Ṭāhir a literary knowledge and understanding which prepared him well for his future vocation as an author. The broadcasting station exposed Bahā' Ṭāhir to the international literary world, studying the works of major Western writers in order to present them accurately and effectively to Egyptian listeners.

Between 1959 and 1961 Bahā' Ṭāhir was transferred to the Cairo Radio Station "Ṣawt al- 'Arab". One of the goals of the broadcasting station was to promote Arab revolution and Arab unity throughout the Middle East. It aimed to encourage revolutionaries, in particular in Algeria, who sought freedom from foreign rule. In its early days it was able to boast of great successes. Indeed, once the station was visited by a group of Americans wanting to write a report on the station and how it was run. The Americans concluded that it was not possible that Bahā' Ṭāhir and his colleagues could, with such a simple set-up, be responsible for broadcasting those programmes which were having such an impact on their Arab brothers. The Americans concluded that those responsible were actually a group of Nazis working underground!⁴

The days of unity and pan-Arabism were short lived. Complaints directed at the broadcasting station started to come in. Bahā' Ṭāhir became disillusioned with the political squabbling, wheeling and dealing and sought to return to Radio 2 to pursue his goal of improving society through cultural rather than political outlets. He requested a transfer but was turned down. Finally, after handing in his resignation, a sympathetic boss acquired the transfer for Bahā' Ṭāhir which he desired.

Between 1962 and 1975 Bahā' resumed his work at Radio 2. It was whilst working there that he met his first wife. They married in 1968 and the following year the first of their two daughters, Dīna, was born. In the late 60's Bahā' Ṭāhir did post-graduate work at Cairo University, first in modern history and later in mass communications. He then taught part-time for a number of years in the Institute of Cinema and Dramatic Art and in the Faculty of Mass Communications.⁵

"I don't understand ... the issue must be as clear as the sun. You're from Upper Egypt; from the Arabs of Upper Egypt. You understand those traditions better than me."

"What traditions? Please! Be explicit! There's no need to beat about the bush."

"God forgive you! The story, as far as I know, is that your maternal uncle, who is at the same time your father's paternal cousin, was the only one in the family who maintained good relations with your father. Isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"Due to family ties of course. The whole family broke off relations with your father because he squandered his inheritance on ... let us say, pleasure ... everyone except your maternal uncle ... The man was prepared to endure the wrath of the rest of his brothers for the sake of family ties, but he wasn't prepared to endure murder threats."

I laughed, leaning my head backwards. My eyes caught sight of the two gondola poles, pointing like two spears. He raised his voice a little, saying:-

"I don't know if you're feigning ignorance of this or if you really don't know. However, at that time they all went to him, that is your maternal uncle, and said they'd tolerated all that your father had done, but they couldn't tolerate "this shame", as they called it ... that is, his wife having an affair with you. They told him either to divorce her or they would kill her and kill you at the same time."

"Nonsense. Some despicable person wanted to sully my reputation so he invented this fictitious story."

"Perhaps, but how can you prove that it's a lie?"

"There are a thousand indisputable evidences. I'm telling you that it's not true. I'm not so vulgar as to think ... to think of even to consider my uncle's wife. She was she was like my mother just like my mother."

"I'm not inquiring about that now. I respect what you say. I believe there was nothing between you, but what proof is there to show that those events weren't the outcome of that rumour."

By the end of the 1960's Bahā' Ṭāhir had been appointed co-director of Radio 2. He had also acquired some enemies. Those enemies subsequently submitted complaints that Bahā' had been using Radio 2 to promote communism. According to Bahā' all investigations carried out proved that there were no grounds for such complaints.⁶ Nevertheless, Bahā' Ṭāhir was demoted to the foreign service of Cairo Radio as head of a proposed drama unit which in fact never came into being⁷. In 1975 he left Radio 2 altogether after eighteen years of service.

In 1977 Bahā' Ṭāhir began to work as a freelance translator for UNESCO and other United Nations organisations. From 1981 he has lived permanently abroad, working for United Nations agencies.⁸ Bahā' Ṭāhir left Egypt disillusioned and frustrated that he had been prevented from fulfilling his role in Egyptian society, for both political and financial reasons. He stated:- "There is no hope of distinguished people fulfilling their role in serving society, in whatever field, whether cultural, developmental, economical or social, unless those workers have abundant freedom and are rewarded for what they do"⁹.

Up until the present day Bahā' Ṭāhir continues to live abroad, waiting for that time when he feels that he can fulfil his role here in Egypt in complete freedom and be given the recompense he deserves for his work. Bahā' has maintained close contact with his homeland through frequent visits. He has also built strong ties with the international world. In 1991 he re-married a Bulgarian lady whom he met through work.

It was in the 1950's that Bahā' Ṭāhir started to write short stories and one act plays, though his first story was not published until 1964. During the 1960's Bahā' wrote and published articles and short stories in various Egyptian literary magazines. After 1972 Bahā' Ṭāhir remained almost silent for over ten years, refusing to publish in magazines outside Egypt, and unable to do so within, due to the censorship of all potential publications. It was not until 1984 that Bahā' Ṭāhir published his first short story collection "al-Khuṭūba". This is comprised of a collection of his short stories written between 1964 and 1972. That same year Bahā' also published his second short story collection "Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k" and his first novel "Sharq al-Nakhīl." In 1985, he published his third short story collection "Anā al-Malik Jī't" and his second novel "Qālat Duḥā." He also published "Ashr Masrahīyyāt Miṣrīyyā," a critical work on ten Egyptian plays. Bahā' Ṭāhir has continued to write various articles for different magazines and newspapers. His most recent novel "Khālī Ṣafīyya wa-al-Dayr" was published in 1991. In December 1991 it was announced that this novel had won first place in an opinion poll for "the most important novel published in 1991".¹¹

REFERENCES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. This information was provided by Bahā' Ṭāhir's elder daughter Dīna, in a personal interview with her in May 1991.
2. This information was provided by Bahā' Ṭāhir himself in a personal letter 22/5/1991.
3. Ibid.
4. Bahā' Ṭāhir, "Ḥikāyatī ma' a al-Idhā", "Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr", number 1482, Cairo, 31 May 1984, p48.
5. Editors Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ and Catherine Cobham, "A Reader of Modern Arabic Short Stories", London, 1988, p 23.
6. Bahā' Ṭāhir, "Ḥikāyatī ma 'al-Idhā", "Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr", number 1483, Cairo, 7 June 1984, p 48-50.
7. Bahā' Ṭāhir, "Ḥikāyatī ma 'al-Idhā", "Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr", number 1481, Cairo, 24 May 1984, p52.
8. Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ and Catherine Cobham. Ibid p23.
9. Bahā' Ṭāhir, "Ḥikāyatī...." 7th June, 1984 p50.
10. Information provided by Bahā' Ṭāhir in a personal letter 20.12.1991.
11. Ibid.

CHAPTER 3

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SHORT STORIES OF BAHĀ' ṬĀHIR WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE SHORT STORIES "AL-KHUṬŪBA", "SUNDUS", "MUḤĀKAMAT AL-KĀHIN KĀYY-NAN" AND "MUḤĀWARAT AL-JABAL".

The three short story collections and three novels written by Bahā' Ṭāhir clearly demonstrate that he is motivated to write by a burning desire to change and improve society as a whole. He himself stated:- "The intellectual is the nation's mind and its conscience. He is the natural leader of the nation."¹ In all of his books Bahā' Ṭāhir's goal is to hold a mirror up for his readers, enabling them to see their faults and failures. However, he does not leave his readers in despondency. As he says, he does not write:- "so that people will cry, but so that they will change."² Bahā' Ṭāhir gives his readers a vision for a better world where people care for one another and work together for the common good, where integrity rather than selfish ambition is the principle by which people live, and where crippling traditional customs and policies are replaced by ones based on justice and truth. Bahā' Ṭāhir challenges his readers to get involved in the fight for the realisation of that vision.

There are many writers who have the same goal as Bahā' Ṭāhir, but those who are able to achieve that goal through artistic means are not so easy to find. It is evident from Bahā' Ṭāhir's books that he is particularly gifted as an author and that he has profound insight, not only into his own culture and people, but also into Western culture and people.³ The style in which Bahā' Ṭāhir writes reflects the trends of the more talented writers of his generation. In the 1960's Bahā' began by writing in a cold, detached style using short sentences which, though on the surface were void of emotion, nevertheless evoked strong emotions in the reader. (Bahā'-Ṭāhir describes every day, normal situations firmly rooted in reality). "*al-Khuṭūba*" is a prime example of a story written in this kind of style. By the 1980's Bahā's stories had moved from the realms of reality into the surreal. He began to employ myths and use the mystical to express his ideas and feelings, keeping in line with his contemporaries and the trends of his generation at the time. "*Anā al-Malik Jī't*" clearly demonstrates this move towards the mystical.

Likewise, Bahā' Ṭāhir's concentration on the characters of his stories has enhanced the quality of his writing, even if this is on occasion at the expense of the plot itself. From the start of his career as a writer, Bahā' Ṭāhir's character portrayal has been astute, revealing a deep perceptiveness and passion for people and the plights in which they find themselves. For example the short story "Sundus" has little plot. However, Bahā' Ṭāhir shows an astute understanding of the hearts and minds of village women and peddlers dealings with them

through his character portrayal of Sundus and Umm Idrīs. Nevertheless, it is clear that with time Bahā' Tāhir's character portrayal has improved and his later heros are more rounded, more realistic characters with all the complexities of normal human beings. Farid, for example, in "*Anā al-Malik Ji't*" is a far more complex character than the narrator in "*al-Khuṭūba*". Not only does Bahā' Tāhir handle Farīd's outward situation as a disillusioned eye doctor in Bāb al-Lūq, but he also looks into Farīd's inner being and his desperate search for meaning and happiness in life.

a. 'AL-KHUṬŪBA' (1968)

The short story collection "*al-Khuṭūba*" introduces us to Bahā' Tāhir's writing at the outset of his career as an author in the 1960's. The collection is comprised of nine short stories which together express the worries and concerns prevalent amongst Egyptian intellectuals during the 1960's. "The collection stands by itself as one of the deepest visions of the 1960's writers, of their existence and their concerns together."⁴

The world of Bahā' Tāhir in "*al-Khuṭūba*" is one in which meaningful relationships built on trust and mutual esteem no longer exist. The result is a deep grief which pervades all the short stories in the collection. "Sometimes that grief takes the form of an irate shout or a hysterical laugh, fabricated joy or breaking out into tears, but most of the time it takes the form of silent or quiet reflection from a distant standpoint."⁵ However, Bahā' does not intend his stories to depress his reader. Rather they are written to motivate change. Mutual respect and esteem are jewels which Bahā' Tāhir wishes his readers would retrieve.⁶ Bahā' Tāhir contemplates the relationship between various types of oppressors and those they oppress. He takes a deep look at the power of oppressors and where that power comes from. It emerges that a lot of that power is derived from the yielding of the oppressed to oppression and their indifference towards it.⁷ Through his stories Bahā' challenges oppressors to change their ways and the oppressed to stand up and fight.

The style of all the stories in "*al-Khuṭūba*" is of special significance. Bahā' Tāhir uses a particular style to maximise the impact of his short stories on the reader. He writes as if he were a reporter, describing events in a detached fashion. He gives a penetratingly deep analysis of situations but from a completely neutral standpoint. There is no emotion involved.

Bahā' Ṭāhir uses words from everyday life, just as he chooses routine, mundane situations to express how our ordinary lives can quickly and simply turn into horror stories. Bahā' Ṭāhir's expressions are simple and his sentences short and succinct. A particular characteristic of the stories in "al-Khuṭūba" is the way in which Bahā' Ṭāhir uses dialogue to describe the situations which he wishes to portray. He uses dialogue in a particularly skilful way to produce a dramatic effect which cannot be obtained through simple narrative. Indeed the style of this particular short story collection is something in between that of the short story and the play. Bahā' Ṭāhir uses the style of the theatre a lot yet still remains within the traditional format of the short story.⁸

"al-Khuṭūba"

"al-Khuṭūba" (The Engagement) is the first story in this short story collection. It is a prime example of Bahā' Ṭāhir's literary expertise during the 1960's. Bahā' Ṭāhir begins in a characteristic way by providing the reader with a simple, every-day situation: a young man is going to visit the father of a girl (Layla) with whom he has become acquainted at work in order to ask his permission to marry her. However, it is not long before the reader begins to doubt whether the story will have a happy ending.

The young man, who is the narrator, is led in silence by a somewhat hostile maid into a stuffy drawing-room that has long been closed to the fresh air and light of the outside world. The drawing room atmosphere is an external reflection of Layla's father's inner attitude: conservative and closed to the modern way of life in which daughters have true freedom to choose whom they want to marry.

Once the young man has stated his desire to marry Layla, he waits for Layla's father to respond. It is not long before all the narrator's dreams of a happy future with Layla are shattered. Layla's father asks the young man a number of pointed questions regarding his family and background. The father has clearly done a lot of research into the subject already. Finally the father tells the young man of a rumour which claimed that the young man had sullied his family's reputation by carrying on a relationship with his aunt. The young man's Upper Egyptian uncles had threatened to kill the young man and his aunt unless the aunt's husband divorce her. The young man's dubious family history made Layla's father reluctant

to accept him as a husband for his daughter. However, the father fears his daughter's wrath and thus resorts to underhand methods in order to bring an end to the young man's relationship with Layla. The father tries to bribe the young man into convincing Layla that he's abandoned the idea of marriage by offering him job promotion. When this fails, the father threatens to reveal all the young man's family secrets.

At first the young man tries to refute all the rumours the father has heard. He threatens to tell Layla what her father has said. However, when the father threatens the young man's family reputation, the young man agrees to do anything the father wants. The physical injury which the young man receives as he falls down the stairs when leaving Layla's home is an external picture of how he feels internally. He has been deeply hurt by his time with Layla's father. However, the story ends on a hopeful note. After leaving the building, the narrator decides to return to Layla's home. He begins to climb the stairs again. It is as if he is going to attempt to fight traditional attitudes towards marriage, embodied in Layla's father and try to convince Layla's father that he will make her a suitable husband.

The story dramatizes one kind of relationship in Egyptian society in which there is tension, conflict and a great lack of mutual esteem. The older generation, represented by Layla's father, are bound up in their traditional values and find it difficult to relate effectively to the younger generation whose philosophies of life differ, particularly when it comes to marriage. Rather than discussing the issue together and coming to a mutual understanding and agreement, the older generation deny the younger generation their freedom of choice. The older generation manipulate situations according to the way they think is best. Hence Layla's father resorts to underhand methods to break off the young man's relationship with Layla, rather than giving the young man the opportunity to prove himself to be a suitable prospective husband in his own right and regardless of his family background. In a similar underhand way, the father does not consult his daughter about the information he has received concerning the man she loves. The father refuses to allow his daughter to make up her own mind, given the evidence. He does not even have the courage to admit to Layla that he has refused permission for the young man to marry her.

The young man demonstrates how the oppressed younger generation respond to the older generation who are manipulating and controlling their lives. He gives in far too easily to the father. After some mishandled attempts to resist the father the young man readily submits to being a pawn in the father's hands, suggesting himself that he break off all relations with Layla if that is what her father wants.

The young man and the father are well-portrayed, though it cannot be said that they are well-rounded characters. It is to Bahā' Tāhir's credit that neither one of them is pictured as being all good or all bad. This makes them both far more realistic. The father, though cunning and manipulative, genuinely has the best interests of his daughter at heart, as he sees them. "He has been unable to come to terms with society's changing views on marriage and women's position in society,"⁹ though he pays lip-service to them. He treasures his relationship with his daughter, and is thereby driven to manipulation of the man she loves, rather than face her temper were he to express his real feelings or concerns. The young man, though a victim of both the father's and society's traditional views, is nonetheless not without blame himself. From the first moment he does not act in a way that is appropriate for a university graduate who is in love and genuinely loved.¹⁰ He is indecisive, incapable even of answering the father's question as to whether he should open the shutters or not. He is also ignorant of his family's struggles and problems and is therefore totally unprepared to answer questions which he should have expected he would have to answer. When faced with difficulties, all he does is lose his temper, insulting his prospective father-in-law. He basically allows himself to be intimidated where he could have fought with his knowledge, his modern mind and the strength of his feelings for Layla.

It is the style of "*al-Khutūba*" which gives the story its greatest value. The style is abrupt, cold and lacking in all sentimentalism. However, it is that very lack of all sentimentality, that neutrality and prudence of expression which arouse feelings of anger, grief and alarm so powerfully in the reader. Like most of Bahā' Tāhir's stories, "*al-Khutūba*" is written in the first person singular. This increases the dramatic effect and impact on the reader as he is brought right into the middle of the situation; he cannot be a passive observer from the outside. Dialogue in the story is also an important factor contributing to its effectiveness. "Though not in Egyptian colloquial Arabic, the dialogue dramatically represents the changing emotions of the two characters: boredom, apprehension, fear, relief, in the structure and rhythm of the sentences as well as in the choice of words."¹¹ Finally, the structure of "*al-Khutūba*" is neat and compact, every little detail fitting together perfectly to make a complete picture. Even the narrator's lie to his bawwab that he is going for an interview at the bank where he is expecting promotion, ironically turns almost into truth when Layla's father tries to bribe him with the prospect of promotion.

b. "BI-AL-AMS ḤALAMT BI-K" (1984)

The collection "Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k" (Yesterday I Dreamt about You) has a similar purpose to that of "al-Khuṭūba" in that it seeks to put an end to individualism and to get people to relate to one another properly.¹² As in "al-Khuṭūba", Bahā' Ṭāhir chooses trivial incidents to describe various types of social relationships and how they are affected by prejudices, customs and traditions.¹³ The title story "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" portrays the loneliness felt by Egyptians living in the West in a seemingly hostile environment, the racism of Westerners towards Easterners, the deceit in relationships in general and the search for a meaningful and better life by both Westerners and Easterners. "*al-Nāfidha*" (The Window) depicts a number of different working relationships between employers and their employees and between the employees themselves. The short story demonstrates how superficial relationships can be. As soon as the office workers are accused of misconduct at work, they go out of their way to vindicate themselves at the expense of a so-called friend's career. The story shows the lack of integrity in working relationships. The only person who is willing to admit the truth is the narrator and he is advised by the attorney to keep quiet and stick to lying. "*Finjān Qahwa*" (A Cup of Coffee) portrays how selfish and heartless people can be, particularly in family relationships. Uncle Ḥamīd refuses to help his brother's widow and her children financially, preferring to waste his money away on alcohol. The uncle's solution to the family's financial needs is to arrange that his niece marry a rich friend of his whom she does not love and who is old enough to be her father. In this way uncle Ḥamīd will absolve himself of his own financial responsibilities to his brother's family. The widowed mother is willing to submit to his wishes because she is in desperate need of security now that her husband has died. Finally, in "*Naṣiḥa min Shābb Ḥāqil*" (Advice from a Sensible Young Man), Bahā' Ṭāhir mocks the individualistic attitude of a young man who is full of good advice for an impoverished drug addict that comes up to him in the street, but who is totally lacking in compassion and unwilling to sacrifice the time it would take to really help the man.¹⁴

The main characteristics of Bahā' Ṭāhir's style are still prominent throughout "Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k", though the collection, in particular the title story "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" indicate how that style has developed and improved. Bahā' Ṭāhir continues to keep to the familiar traditional features of the short story in terms of structure. There is unity of thought and events build up naturally until the aspired goal is reached. As in "al-Khuṭūba", Bahā'

Ṭāhir's world is one of everyday normal life turning into a nightmare. For example, in "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*", an expatriate Egyptian lives a tediously boring life until he meets a Western girl named Anne-Marie. Three weeks later when he goes to inquire after her, a neighbour tells him that Anne-Marie has committed suicide. When her mother eventually opens the door and sees the Egyptian narrator, she screams and collapses. In "*al-Nāfidha*" some seemingly harmless flirting on the part of office workers with the girls in the school opposite leads to the narrator handing in his resignation and his boss being transferred. In "*Naṣīḥa min Shābb 'Āqil*", a beggar who is desperate for money is killed as he runs after a cold-hearted youth, vainly seeking the youth's help.

As in "*al-Khuṭūba*", Bahā' Ṭāhir's language in "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" is simple and succinct. He writes in classical Arabic, interspersed with a few colloquial expressions. Every sentence in the story has a purpose and is chosen with care to prepare for what comes after it. Bahā' Ṭāhir continues to make full use of dialogue to enable his stories to make a maximum impact on the reader.

There is a new element of style in "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" which was not present in any of the short stories in "*al-Khuṭūba*". In the title story "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" Bahā' Ṭāhir leads the reader gently from the world of reality into the world of mystery and fantasy until the two worlds become completely mixed. By the end of the story the narrator is no longer sure if he is dreaming of if what he is experiencing is real.¹⁵

Bahā' Ṭāhir also makes use of the symbolic in the title story to a far greater extent than he did in any story from "*al-Khuṭūba*". In "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" a hawk appears in a dream to Anne-Marie, banging on her window at night. She thinks it is the narrator himself, coming to deliver her from her hurts and frustrations and to lead her into a meaningful life. When the narrator fails to give her that salvation for which she longs, she commits suicide.

Later the hawk appears to the narrator. It is as if that hawk is his salvation as he stretches out to take hold of it, seeing colours and lights which are more beautiful than has ever seen in his life before. Bahā' Ṭāhir has used the hawk, an object of worship in Ancient Egypt, to symbolise deliverance¹⁶ from a meaningless life of monotony and loneliness. Likewise snow in "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" is utilized by Bahā' Ṭāhir as an external symbol which reflects both the narrator's internal state and the state of the Western society in which he is living. Life is harsh, cold and isolated. People are cold and unfriendly towards one another.

"Sundus"

"Sundus" is Bahā's first short story to be set in an Egyptian village. He shows a penetrating insight into village ways and customs that has its roots in his childhood. The setting in which Bahā' Ṭāhir places the story, together with the interaction between Sundus, Umm Idrīs and Mubarka is so realistic that it is as if Bahā' Ṭāhir were transcribing a real event. Umm Idrīs is at home with her daughter Mubarka when Sundus the gipsy arrives at the door with a bundle of clothes and a box of household items to sell. From the start Umm Idrīs assumes a hostile attitude towards her visitor, rebuking Sundus that she is a 'fine weather friend' who only turns up when she thinks she will profit financially from her visit. Sundus, for her part, knows very well how she can manipulate Umm Idrīs into buying her wares. She lavishes compliments on Mubarka which send Umm Idrīs into a panic, thinking that her daughter will be the victim of the evil eye. It is only Mubarka in her innocence who relates to Sundus in a loving manner. The story ends with Sundus leaving, having sold a fair quantity of her wares and Umm Idrīs forcing her daughter to go through a superstitious ritual in order to cleanse her from any effects of Sundus' supposedly evil eye.

The short-story *"Sundus"* vividly depicts how people use and abuse one another in their fight for survival. It shows the narrow-minded thinking of Egyptian villagers towards outsiders and social outcasts. It also portrays the still-prevalent superstitious practices amongst villagers and demonstrates how people are bound by those beliefs and inhibited from relating to others in a correct manner because of fear. Umm Idrīs' verdict on Sundus is that she has "eyes of poison" which bring nothing but harm to people. Umm Idrīs' judgement is based on the prevalent Egyptian belief that someone can cast the evil eye on a person and harm them through a jealous look or a compliment. Umm Idrīs' belief causes her to reject Sundus completely on a friendship level. The fact that Sundus is worn out from walking around in search of a livelihood, alone without a husband to care for her needs or friends to comfort her in her loneliness, completely escapes Umm Idrīs' notice. Umm Idrīs' heart is not moved to compassion for the gipsy as it should be because she is paranoid that she has an evil eye which will bring harm to her precious daughter. Sundus is cunning in the way she extracts money out of Umm Idrīs. She plays on Umm Idrīs' fears by saying all the compliments used to cast 'an evil eye'. When she comes to leave, Sundus thinks of her next visit to the house and insults Mubarka saying of Mubarka that:- "she is like a dried up stick of corn." It is as

if now Sundus has got what she wants, she is withdrawing her former curses to ensure she will be received well on her next visit. Umm Idrīs is both a victim of her society's wrong beliefs and a victim of Sundus who uses those wrong beliefs to promote her own interests. It is only in Mubarka that Bahā' Ṭāhir offers some hope. As a young girl, she has not yet learned the ways of her mother and she relates freely to Sundus, seeing a beautiful side to her. Mubarka alone expresses care and concern for Sundus, asking her why she never married and innocently questioning her as to why she always carries a stick. She alone accepts and loves Sundus and it is to that love which Sundus warms and responds in a positive way.

The characters in "*Sundus*", though not well-rounded, are nevertheless well-portrayed. They are neither black or white and are thus very realistic. Each character has her faults and her positive side. Umm Idrīs is a typical Egyptian mother from the villages, devoted to her daughter and hence she cannot bear the thought of anything happening to her. At the same time however, Umm Idrīs has no mercy on those in need around her. Sundus is a lonely, emotionally wounded, gipsy with a great capacity to love. Yet she hides that beautiful side behind a tough exterior to protect herself from hurt and to enable her to survive. Mubarka is an innocent girl with a loving heart, but at the same time she is out to enjoy herself whatever the consequences, and will not obey her mother's commands.

As with the other stories in "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*", "*Sundus*" is written in a style like that of a reporter who transcribes what he sees and hears without emotion. As in "*al-Khuṭūba*", Bahā' Ṭāhir concentrates mainly on the external to portray the inner hidden meaning. For example, a little comment such as Umm Idrīs "rushed towards her daughter, who was rubbing her eyes" holds a wealth of meaning. Is it just chance that Mubarka is rubbing her eyes? Are her eyes really itching as a result of playing with dirt and then putting her fingers in her eyes, or are Sundus' envious looks beginning to do their damage? Similarly, Umm Idrīs' dream at the beginning of the story and her reaction to it: "Your protection O God!" effectively portrays to the reader that Umm Idrīs is anticipating that something bad is about to happen.

As in "*al-Khuṭūba*", dialogue in "*Sundus*" is of utmost importance. Indeed, it is almost as if "*Sundus*" is the script for a short skit. The scene is set at the beginning of the story and then the plot unfolds through dialogue, interspersed with comments on how the scene changes, where the characters sit and what they do. One special characteristic of "*Sundus*"

which is not so evident in Bahā' Ṭāhir's other short-stories is his use of Egyptian colloquial expressions such as "Yiḥillaha al-Ḥallāl", "Yā hālka nāsik" and "Yukhrūṭha kharrāṭ al-banāt."¹⁷ It is expressions such as these which give the story a special richness and realism.

c. "ANĀ AL-MALIK JI'T"

The short story collection "Anā al-Malik Ji't" (I the King Have Come) reflects the third and most developed stage of Bahā' Ṭāhir's writing in theme, character portrayal and style. The collection is a prime example of the new wave of innovative writing which emerged during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Bahā' Ṭāhir continues to deal with the theme of people and the way they relate to one another, but he shifts from an analysis of the external to a direct analysis of the internal. Bahā' Ṭāhir's characters, for the most part, have more depth to them, in particular in "Anā al-Malik Ji't" and "Muḥāwarat al-Jabal." The author reveals the internal thought processes in his characters and their different philosophies of life. There is a corresponding change in Bahā' Ṭāhir's style, more suited to the new type of stories which he is writing. There is no longer an emphasis on the cold, succinct style of a reporter recording a dialogue between two or more people. Instead his more modern stories are replete with rich, poetical passages that describe scenes in great detail. This is a characteristic hitherto unseen in "Bahā' Ṭāhir's work. Bahā' Ṭāhir moves away from texts which describe realistic, everyday situations and begins to explore the realms of myth and mystery.

Once again the stories in "Anā al-Malik Ji't" are each a reflection on man's struggle to relate to the people and the world around him. Once again Bahā' Ṭāhir expresses a desire for a new and better world with better people in it. Man's relationships are discussed in a much more general sense in "Anā al-Malik Ji't" than in Bahā' Ṭāhir's previous stories. Bahā' Ṭāhir is also, for the most part, more discrete in the handling of his themes, weaving them into a multi-coloured tapestry of illusions and inuendos that are not easily comprehended without some thought. In the title story "Anā al-Malik Ji't", the hero Farīd hears an inner voice calling him to leave his successful eye clinic in Bāb al-Lūq and set off on a mysterious adventure. The story reflects mankind's search for meaning in life and for a love which cannot be found in reality.

In "Fī Ḥadīqa Ghayr ʿĀdiyya" (In an Unusual Garden) Bahā' Ṭāhir depicts the loneliness and isolation suffered by individuals in the West, brought about by their selfish, goal-orientated lifestyle. The only place that a lonely old lady finds to get her emotional needs for love met is in a smelly garden which is purpose-built for dogs. Human relationships have disintegrated to such an extent in the West that the old lady pours out her heart to her dog rather than to her daughter. Bahā' Ṭāhir also indicates the absurdity of Western values. It is acceptable to exploit Third World countries and allow fellow human beings to go hungry whilst you use the stolen wealth to pamper and spoil your pet dogs.

Bahā' Ṭāhir keeps to the traditional short story form in "Anā al-Malik Ji't", but he experiments with various different stylistic techniques to give his stories a new depth and quality.¹⁸ In "Anā al-Malik Ji't" a move from reality into complete fantasy is clearly distinguishable. The first part of the story is set in well known places in Egypt. Farīd leaves his eye clinic in Bāb al-Lūq and begins a journey from Imbāba camel market. He travels to Sīwa. At this point the story begins to move from reality into mystery when Farīd determines, against all advice, to search for a temple which no one has heard of, in the middle of the desert. The closer Farīd and his companions get, the more surreal the setting until just before the party's arrival at the temple, a strange man dressed in a tatty yellow robe appears, or seems to appear. When Farīd's companions run off and leave Farīd alone, it is as if Farīd has lost all contact with reality. His only concern is to decipher the message hidden in the temple hieroglyphics.

The language in "Anā al-Malik Ji't" reflects the mystical nature of the stories. It is poetical, full of feeling and rich in symbolism. It is the language of romance and mystery. For example, in "Anā al-Malik Ji't," when Farīd is alone in the temple, he deciphers this from the hieroglyphics:- "I, the King have come. When the woman left... When all those who had gathered round me had departed.. When I found myself alone I reached total perfection. When you were my god and I was your best friend... You are the light and I am the reflection of the light..."

"Muḥakamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan"

Muḥakamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan combines Bahā' Ṭāhir's fascination for Ancient Egyptian civilization and his politically active conscience which prompts him to plead for

justice to prevail in government. The short story is set in Ancient Egypt during the first period of the New Kingdom in the eighteenth dynasty. The innovative pharaoh Akhnaton (1372-1354 BC) has just been overthrown; his new religion which propagated the theory of the unity of god named Aton has been rejected in favour of the old polytheistic religion in which Ammon held an unrivalled position of authority. The religious priests of Ammon are in the process of wiping out all opposition which might threaten their political and religious supremacy. It is thus that they have arrested the priest Kāy-Nan, an influential leader and expositor of Aton worship.

The plot begins with two of Ammon's priests discussing the most painful way to punish and annihilate Kāy-Nan for his heresy. The high priest Siminkh attempts to restrain them and uphold pharonic law. The trial proceeds in a highly unprofessional manner until Kāy-Nan appeals that he might be judged according to Maat's feather.¹⁹ He is returned to prison to await the outcome of his plea: either the annihilation of his body by the god's lightning within three days or the weighing of his body against Maat's feather, whichever took place first. The lightning of the gods arrives in the form of the high priest Siminkh who sets Kāy-Nan free and persuades him to run away in order that he might continue to write, thereby being a tool in the promotion of a more just system of government in the future.

The short story "Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan" can be taken as a political allegory which analyses the political change which took place in Egypt when Nasser's rule came to an end and Sadat took over. The story demonstrates the relationship between the Egyptian government and the Egyptian people. Bahā' Ṭāhir condemns Sadat's government for its curtailment on freedom of speech and suppression of political opposition. The priests' vindictive treatment of Kāy-Nan corresponds, according to Bahā', to the way that Sadat's officials violated human rights in their attempts to gain political supremacy. Bahā' Ṭāhir satirizes those Egyptians in the government who supported Sadat, representing them in the character of Siminkh and hinting that they were ill-equipped to do their job: (Siminkh's job was to gaze constantly at the lights of Ammon to the East and to the West. However, how could he possibly do this effectively when he had a squint!) Similarly, just as Siminkh was too weak to stop the corruption of the priests under his authority, Bahā' Ṭāhir implies that the intellectuals were too weak to stand up against injustice.

Bahā' Ṭāhir criticizes Sadat's government for the way in which it governed, as Bahā' saw it, by instilling fear in the Egyptian people. Siminkh tries to justify this method of rule to Kāy-Nan by saying that the people need fear in order to live pious lives; living piously does not come naturally to them. He tries to say that the peoples' nature caused their priests to create a religion for them that required the worship of blood thirsty gods who demand sacrifices and the torture of people. Siminkh says the people need this kind of rule so the priests gave it to them. Kāy-Nan argues that it is rather the religious priesthood who have set the standard by which the people live. The way the people are is a direct result of how they are governed.

In "Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan", Bahā' Ṭāhir advocates that Nasser's regime was far better than Sadat's. Bahā' does this through the character of Kāy-Nan. Kāy-Nan expounds how the worship of Aton was far better for the people than the worship of Ammon. Aton was a sun-god, bringing beautiful light and warmth to his people. He did not require sacrifices but rather rejoiced when people rejoiced. What was important for Aton was that people lived morally upright lives and treated one another properly. He did not want people to be tortured or oppressed. The simple obelisks that were set up to seek Aton's favour were symbolic of Aton's compassionate heart and just mind, for where was the justice in money being spent on splendid temples for the worship of Ammon whilst people still lived in squalor. In contrast, Ammon, according to Kāy-Nan, dwelt in a dark sanctuary, untouched by the light of the sun. Ammon's name meant "concealment", totally the opposite of Aton who brought all things to light.

The reigns of Nasser and Sadat, according to Bahā' Ṭāhir, can be compared to the eras of Aton and Ammon. Bahā' claims that like Aton, Nasser had the good of the people at heart. He claims that as Aton brought light and warmth, so Nasser brought freedom from British domination. Like Akhnaton, who established a new religion, Nasser established a new political system for Egypt. Like Akhnaton's reign, Nasser's was far from perfect, but it was, according to Bahā' Ṭāhir, a step in the right direction. Sadat's reign, according to Bahā', corresponds to what happened when the pharonic Egyptians returned to the worship of Ammon. Sadat took Egypt back into the "dark-ages", just as Ammon's temple was dark and his worship required sacrifice. Bahā' Ṭāhir claims that Sadat re-introduced the policies which Nasser had thrown out and established political stability through enforced obedience rather than winning the hearts of the people by giving them good gifts.

It must be said however, that Bahā' Ṭāhir has been very subjective in his analysis of the regimes of Nasser and Sadat. He has allowed his own political views to influence the way he has portrayed history. Reality was that Nasser's regime was just as suppressive as Sadat's. Censorship under Nasser was just as heavy, if not worse. Just as Sadat imprisoned those who opposed him, so did Nasser.

However, it is not just Sadat's government which is the object of Bahā' Ṭāhir's satire. He also alludes to the fickleness of the Egyptian people who change their affections overnight from one leader to another, whatever the policies of those leaders might be. This thought is expressed in the conversation between Siminkh and Kāy-Nan, in Kāy-Nan's prison cell. Siminkh cannot understand how one day all the people can be so enthusiastic about worshipping Aton when Akhnaton is ruling, then when he falls and the new king reverts back to the worship of Ammon, the people immediately revert back with him. Kāy-Nan calls such people "the hypocrites that are present in every age."

The characters in "*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*" lack the depth and reality of characters in Bahā' Ṭāhir's other short stories, due to the fact that Bahā' Ṭāhir is using his story as an allegory. The characters are stereo-typed and to a large extent depicted in black and white terms that are uncharacteristic of Bahā' Ṭāhir. The priest Kāy-Nan comes across as being an exemplary model of a righteous person. He has the interests of people at heart, in particular the poor. He is willing to stay in prison and face death rather than endanger the well-being of the high priest or his guard. Kāy-Nan boldly challenges the judging priests in court and heroically endures all the torture and pain inflicted on him for the sake of his beliefs. When Kāy-Nan runs away at the end of the story, it is inferred that he does so for the sake of the people, to use his literary talent to guide them to a better system of government.

The two priests Bāt and Tarībīt are the incarnation of evil. They show no mercy or compassion in their treatment of Kāy-Nan; rather they take malicious delight in inventing the most gruesome tortures which they can think of to punish him. They are utterly corrupt and unethical in all their dealings. Bāt has been using the priests' papyrus records to make fires to keep himself warm on cold winter's nights; together the two rig Maat's scales to produce whatever judgement suits their choice.

Siminkh is perhaps the most realistic of the characters in "*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*". He is morally good but hampered by his weak character. He is willing to go so far as

to drug the prison guard in order to save his friend Kāy-Nan's life, but he fails to stand up publicly for justice to be carried out. Indeed, in Kāy-Nan's trial, Siminkh is not so much concerned as to whether justice is carried out but more as to whether justice is seen to be done in the light of future generations reading the trial's proceedings. Though Siminkh is the high priest, it becomes clear in his conversation with Kāy-Nan that he's not even sure of his own religious convictions.

"*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*" has certain similarities with Plato's "Apology" in which Plato depicts the trial of the historical figure Socrates. Like Plato's Socrates, Kāy-Nan challenges others about their own virtue. Both Socrates and Kāy-Nan are exemplary men of virtue. Both men have impacted their generation and are then put on trial for the influence they have had on others' lives. Both men are sentenced to death. However, the two stories part when Socrates actually chooses to go through with his execution rather than make a dishonourable escape.

This particular short story is the only complete allegory written by Bahā' Ṭāhir, though there is an allegorical element in "Qālat Duḥá" which emerges part of the way through the main story. Bahā' Ṭāhir's handling of the allegory in "*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*" is particularly effective. He has chosen a suitable historical event to put across his message, finding an almost exact parallel in history to portray more contemporary events in Egypt. Nevertheless, it must be said that Bahā' Ṭāhir has painted the reign of Akhnaton in a too positive light in order to elevate Nasser's regime. Reality was that Akhnaton practiced just the same political oppression of the people as his successor. Just as his successor forbade the worship of Aton and annihilated all his supporters, so did Akhnaton do in his reign, destroying the temples of Ammon and wiping out Ammon's followers to ensure his own political stability.

The style used by Bahā' Ṭāhir in "*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*" is highly appropriate for his subject matter. As in "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*", the story contains much longer, richer descriptive passages in comparison to the short succinct sentences found in Bahā' Ṭāhir's earlier stories. These passages picture a beautiful ancient-Egyptian setting, full of temples and narcissus beds, obelisks and palaces. In contrast, Bahā' Ṭāhir uses modern-day bureaucratic jargon when depicting Kāy-Nan's trial. The jargon used in the priests'

dialogue effectively points to the theme of the story. The priests' language during the trial adds reality to an otherwise unrealistic setting.

"*Muḥākamat al-Kāhin Kāy-Nan*" is also rich in innuendos and symbolic allusions. For example, the way in which the priests of Ammon greet one another is the same way in which Nazis greeted one another during Hitler's rule in Germany. The inference is that Sadat's government is like that of Hitler's. Bahā' Ṭāhir's description of Akhnaton's secret police as being strong, illiterate men with sharp hearing is a satirical comment directed at Egypt's state security police. It is renowned that these men are selected on the basis of their poor literacy and bodily strength. In this way they will do as they are told and report all they see and hear exactly as it happens.

"*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*"

"*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*" demonstrates the broader vision that Bahā' Ṭāhir has developed for the plight of his people and the corresponding new depth which this has brought into his character portrayal. The story also shows certain characteristics of Bahā' Ṭāhir's new style of writing. The scene is set in Bāb al-Lūq when the once again anonymous narrator introduces the reader to himself and to the other characters who frequent a lottery ticket booth with him. Whilst the narrator is waiting for ʿAmm ʿAbbās in a coffee house, a grey-haired man attaches himself to the narrator and will not leave him alone. The grey-haired man entices the narrator to walk with him to the hills on the outskirts of Islamic Cairo and smoke hashish there. He does this by telling the narrator the life-story of Hānim, a dancer employed in his casino, her husband ʿAbbās and his dealings with them both.

The narrator tells the grey-haired man of childhood experiences: his love for his sister who died, his failure with women; the example his father had set him by never complaining in the midst of difficulty and always treating people with great respect. The grey-haired man in turn tells the narrator how his wealthy parents were killed in a car crash when he was sixteen and how he was taken in by their Western neighbour, a middle-aged lady who owned a casino. The grey-haired man chose to work with her at the casino and she taught him her philosophy of life. Finally the grey-haired man tells the narrator that he has won first prize in the lottery. He suggests that the narrator give the money to him so that he can invest it for him and make

maximum profits. The narrator however rejects the grey-haired man and his philosophy for life, walking back down the hill alone as a new day dawns.

"Muḥāwarat al-Jabal" presents the reader with two different philosophies of life; two different ways in which a person can choose to relate to those around him and to life in general. One of those philosophies has its roots in Eastern civilization and one in Western civilization. Bahā' Ṭāhir outlines these different philosophies and points the reader towards which one he considers best. The narrator's philosophy of life is to "live a life of love", to appreciate art and beauty, to give expression to his emotional feelings and to enjoy the good things in life such as marriage and having a comfortable home. That philosophy has its roots in the narrator's childhood in an Egyptian village. The narrator experienced a tender love from his mother and from his sister. He also watched his father work long hours in the fields to support his family without ever grumbling about his lot in life. Later the narrator saw how considerate and caring his father was towards others, even though he himself was bedridden and could have adopted a bitter attitude towards life, demanding that others serve him in his infirmity. The narrator watched his father die with a look of peace over his face, knowing that he was going to a better world. The narrator's philosophy is the one which represents an "Eastern" philosophy of life and it is this philosophy which Bahā' Ṭāhir wishes to promote.

The alternative philosophy to life is represented in the grey-haired man. It has its roots in the West and though the grey-haired man is Egyptian by birth, nevertheless he was known in his younger days as "Westerner". The grey-haired man's philosophy is also a product of childhood experiences. His parents were financially prosperous and he had all kinds of luxuries as a child which would supposedly give him the best start in life. However, the grey-haired man then experienced the tragedy of his parents being killed in a car-crash at the age of sixteen. A root of anger and bitterness towards life started to grow in his heart. When he was taken in by his Western neighbour, she perfected his philosophy of life for him, teaching him to get all he could out of life through the accumulation of power; possessing others but allowing no one to possess him. His goal in life became to accumulate power through wealth and to get revenge against life.

The grey-haired man's philosophy is in many ways similar to that of Nietzsche. Nietzsche expounded the theory of self-realization, asserting that man is essentially like an

animal but that he has additional potentiality to raise himself above that animal stage if he will only cultivate his nature. He believed that people could be divided into two categories, those of the elite who achieve self-realization and the vast majority who never succeed or even try. Nietzsche developed the theory that the whole of mankind is motivated by the desire to obtain power and that it is power which is the source of pleasure to mankind, but only when that power is increasing. He claimed that marriage is the supreme temptation for man to betray his call. He also believed that great men live only for an appointed time and that when that time has come to an end they choose to die, their lives being of no more use afterwards.

In keeping with Nietzsche's philosophy, the grey-haired man's goal in life is to gain power, or to be strong. He considers that that power comes through the possession of an ever-increasing wealth, a philosophy not advocated by Nietzsche. The grey-haired man, like Nietzsche, sees mankind as being divided into two types, those few who are strong and the riff-raff whose lives have no worth. Like Nietzsche's theory, the grey-haired man does not derive pleasure from the suffering he causes to 'Abbās and Hānim, whom he considers to be riff-raff and of no importance. He destroys them 'incidentally' in his search for power. It does not occur to him that his treatment of them is morally wrong. On the contrary, he considers himself to have done Hānim a favour by showing her a side of life she had never seen before and in giving her sexual pleasure she had never known. The fact that when he dispenses with her, she turns into a drug addict, her career as a dancer is ruined and her husband stabs her for being unfaithful is of no consequence to the grey-haired man. He himself says:- "She got what she deserved". The grey-haired man learnt well his lesson from the Western lady to never get attached to anything so that he might possess everything. He never married, but only abused women. Likewise in accordance with Nietzsche's theory on powerful men, the grey-haired man believes that he is immortal; he will not die until he chooses to invite death to come to him.

The fact that when the reader is introduced to the narrator, he is no longer living out his philosophy of life, is of some significance. He is disillusioned by the pain of failure and has lost hope of ever achieving his goals. As a child he deeply loved his sister, but she died. As a student he loved a girl who ran away from him after laughing at his poetry. A once successful village poet, the narrator found himself unable to pursue his education because of his father's death. He longs to marry, but does not have the financial means to do so. All his poetry has

dried up. He has lost his zeal for life and is living a meaningless existence, spending his money on lottery tickets in the vain hope that he will win and gain the happiness he so longs for in that way. Bahā' Ṭāhir is speaking to all those who have 'lost their way' and abandoned the good philosophies they had, frustrated by failure and in despair.

At the end of "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*" a spiritual and emotional re-awakening takes place inside the narrator. He recalls his old philosophy. By the end of the story he has come to the realization that he needs to keep on living out that philosophy, despite the pain and the frustration it might cause him. It is thus that he turns down the grey-haired man's offer to make him lots of money. He realizes that his happiness will not be found in accumulated wealth. He goes back down the hill as a new day is dawning and hope has returned. Thus Bahā' Ṭāhir challenges those who have the narrator's philosophy to keep on going.

It is abundantly clear that Bahā' Ṭāhir wishes to warn his readers against the delusion of such a philosophy of life as that of the grey-haired man. The accumulation of power and wealth in a ruthless and heartless way is the epitome of evil conduct. It is far more commendable to remain poor but to keep one's integrity, responding to others in self-sacrificial love rather than with destructive selfish ambition.

It is noteworthy that the grey-haired man was introduced to his philosophy of life by a Western woman, whereas the narrator was introduced to his through his Egyptian peasant father. Traditionally the village is a symbol of moral purity, uncorrupted by the wickedness of city life. It is also in keeping with Bahā' Ṭāhir's love for the village and passion for its type of lifestyle, ingrained in him since his childhood, that the righteous type of lifestyle should be embodied by an Egyptian peasant. The grey-haired man demonstrates how Westerners corrupted Egyptian people with their individualistic, selfish philosophies and debauched lifestyles. Bahā' Ṭāhir warns all those who might seek to imitate that type of a Western lifestyle.

The characters in "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*" have a much greater depth to them than those of the previous short story collections. Bahā' Ṭāhir goes into much greater detail about their internal thought processes, their backgrounds and the way they view life. Consequently the characters are much less stereo-typed. Indeed Hānim, the narrator and the grey-haired man constitute the most well-rounded characters in all of Bahā' Ṭāhir's short stories.

The most striking feature of "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*" is the language in which Bahā' Ṭāhir writes. It is quite different to all his other stories. The words in the long descriptive passages of how Hānim dances in the casino have a special, sonic quality so that as one reads it is as if the words are the musical rhythm to which she is dancing.²⁰ At other times the simple language of dialogue is interspersed with colloquial expressions that give "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*" a deep-rooted, realistic side, causing greater impact on the reader than would a simple narrative.

Bahā' Ṭāhir also makes use of certain elements of symbolism and mysticism in "*Muḥāwarat al-Jabal*". Though the hills behind Baṭṭnīya are a well-known place in Cairo, famous for crime and corruption, yet the narrator's time there with the grey-haired man has a hint of mystery and symbolism about it. It is as if the two have climbed out of their everyday lives to a high-up place where they can reflect on the path they have chosen to walk in life. For the grey-haired man the hills are life; a place where he regularly re-affirms his determination to continue his debauched lifestyle of smoking hashish and using others to promote his own interests. However, for the narrator the hills remind him of when his sister appeared to him in the graveyard and told him not to return there. The hills for him speak of death; a place to which he should not go if he is to be faithful to the 'path of love' on which he once chose to walk. Unwittingly he has returned to the place where his sister told him not to go, but the experience serves to wake up the narrator from his stupor and help him to get his life back on track. The scorpion which emerges in the warmth of the fire is likewise a vivid, symbolic warning to the narrator of the danger of the man to whom he has started to relate. The dead copse, the desolate place, all speak of a life without meaning or purpose. Similarly the cold weather indicates the hostility, alienation and isolation of the society in which the narrator lives. Ironically the grey-haired man does not feel the cold like the narrator - he has lost all sensitivity to the world around him. The fault of the narrator is that he, as a tall, broad young man should be able to endure the cold; but instead he allows it to almost incapacitate him.

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2. "Bahā' Tāhir : al-Kamm fī kull Anwa' al-Ibdā' lā Qīmata la-hu", "Al-Idha'a wa-al-Tilifizyūn", Number 187, Baghdad, May 1986.
3. The short stories "*Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-ik*" and "*Fī Ḥadīqa Ghayr 'Ādīyya*" demonstrate one of the most penetrating and accurate insights into Western culture by a Middle Eastern author that has been written.
4. Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Wahhāb, "Qirā'a fī Majmū' at *al-Khuṭūba*." "Kḥutwa", Cairo, July 1985 p 64-74.
5. Ibid, p64-74.
6. Ibid, p64-74.
7. Edward Kharrāṭ, "Qirā'a fī Majmū' at *al-Khuṭūba*", Found in the introduction to Bahā' Tāhir's "*al-Khuṭūba*", Cairo 1984, p11.
8. Ibid, p7-8.
9. Editors Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ and Catherine Cobham, "A reader of Modern Arabic Short Stories", London, 1988 p25.
10. Maḥmūd 'Abd al-Wahhāb, Ibid, p64-74.
11. Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ and Catherine Cobham, Ibid. p24.
12. 'Abd al-Ghanī al-Sayyid, "Qirā'a fī Qiṣaṣ Bahā' Tāhir *Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*" "Ibdā'", Number 8, Cairo, August 1984, p119.
13. Ibid, p119-122.

14. Maḥmūd °Abd al-Wahhāb, Ibid.
15. Muḥammad Maḥmūd °Abd al-Rāziq, "Qirā'a fī Qiṣṣat Bahā' Ṭāhir al-Jadīda *Bi-al-Ams Ḥalamt Bi-k*", "Ibdā'", Number 7, Cairo, July 1984, p117.
16. Ibid, p116.
17. The literal meanings of these expressions are: a) "May the one who solves things, solve it". b) "You destroyer of your people". c) "May the one who shapes girls, shape her".
18. The exception to this is the short story is "*Fī Ḥadīqa Ghayr °Adīyya*" which shows no outstanding development in stylistic technique.
19. Kāy-Nan's body, according to this system of judgement, would be weighed on a set of scales against a feather belonging to the goddess Maat. Were his body to weigh less than the feather then he would be pronounced innocent. Should he be heavier than the feather, then he would be pronounced guilty.
20. Shafīq Maqqār, "Manjam Dhahab fī al-Ard al-Kharāb", "al-Nāqid", Number 12, London, June 1989, p60-63.

PART II

THE TRANSLATIONS

I had taken care of everything. An experienced friend took me to a well-known barber who cut and styled my hair, massaged my chin and cheeks and a pound. After that we bought an expensive red necktie and some silver cufflinks for my shirt. Finally, when I stood in front of the mirror, I looked like a stranger. I was no more handsome but I was different: my hair shone and was smoothed flat as if were stuck to my skin, my chin was ruddy and also shone and my shirt collar was starched and perfect. For the first time in my life I fastened a pin to my necktie. Throughout, I had the impression that it would slip and fall off, but it remained firmly attached.

THE ENGAGEMENT

The barber was worried at my appearance. He picked me up and asked me if I was going to get engaged, so I told him that I had an important appointment at the bank and for no reason at all I gave him five pence. He looked at me in amazement. I told him to pray for me because I was expecting to be promoted. In thanking me, he raised his hands to the heavens and began to mumble. I got embarrassed and quickly stepped out the door. The air stung my face and I realized that my temperature was high. Whilst I was in the air, my heart began to throb hard. I was convinced that I had forgotten every word I had prepared and that I would never be able to say anything to my father beyond the phrase "Good-evening". The sweat started.

As I rang the doorbell I told myself that everything would depend on the father and that I could be content with answering his questions. A little girl, about eleven years old, with dark skin and a grave face opened the door for me. She stood behind the crack of the open door and faced me with her two lowered eyes. When I asked about the father she nodded, opened the door and led me to the drawing-room without a word.

I was alone for a while, receding in that familiar drawing-room smell; the smell of wood preserved by lack of ventilation and scarcity of use. The shutters were closed and kept out the warm sunset light, but I could see the pictures by the dazzling light from the chandelier. There was an oil painting of two fishermen standing at either end of a gondola; each one held a long pole which was plunged deep into the water. Their faces were shaded by two wide hats. Behind the brown gondola and the blue canal there was dazzling green and red-coloured European countryside. To the right of the painting there hung a photograph of a man with his hand on the shoulder of a woman who was wearing a bridal outfit for a wedding procession. Then there were pictures of the children at different ages. A picture of a little girl caught my

I had taken care of everything ... An experienced friend took me to a well-known barber who cut and styled my hair, massaged my chin¹ and charged me a pound² ... After that we bought an expensive red neck-tie and some silver cufflinks for my shirt. Finally, when I stood in front of the mirror, I looked like a stranger. I was no more handsome but I was different: my hair shone and was smoothed flat as if were stuck to my skin; my chin was ruddy and also shone and my shirt collar was starched and perfect. For the first time in my life I fastened a pin to my neck-tie. Throughout, I had the impression that it would slip and fall off, but it remained firmly attached until the end.

The bawwāb³ was amazed at my appearance. He grinned and asked me if I was going to get engaged, so I told him that I had an important appointment at the bank and for no reason at all I gave him five piastres. He looked at me in astonishment. I told him to pray for me because I was expecting to be promoted, so thanking me, he raised his hands to the heavens and began to mumble. I got embarrassed and quickly stepped out the door. The air stung my face and I realized that my temperature was high. Whilst I was in the taxi my heart began to throb hard. I was convinced that I'd forgotten every word I'd prepared and that I would never be able to say anything to her father beyond the phrase "Good-evening". The sweat started.

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attention. She was spreading out her short dress to one side with one hand, whilst she raised her other hand in the same way as the pharonic dancing girls. I didn't know if she was Layla or not.

I stood up when the door opened suddenly and he came in wearing a shirt, trousers, medically prescribed glasses and slippers. He gave a slight smile as he gave me his hand. His hand was cold. When he sat down opposite me he asked me if he should open the shutters or not. I gazed at the shutters for a long time and couldn't make a decision, so he said that the spring weather in Egypt fluctuates and is mostly cold. I agreed with him. Then he said that the real spring in Egypt is autumn because there's no humidity, whereas in spring there are the "khamasīn" winds⁴. I added on my part that the "khamasīn" winds carry lots of dust which is harmful to one's eyes. Then he leant back in his chair and said:-

"Welcome."

Silence followed. He sat with his legs crossed, flapping the slipper on his foot so that he revealed his clean, smooth and very white heel. It was like a big egg. There was no longer any escape, so I began to talk without looking at his face. I told him that I was a colleague of Miss Layla at the bank and would like to propose to her once he'd given his permission. I told him about my academic qualifications, my salary and my father. When I finally looked up I found him leaning his head on his chest and it looked as if he hadn't heard anything I'd said. However, in the end he looked up and said:-

"Could you please tell me, which village in Upper Egypt did you say you're from?"

I told him about my village once again.

"Are you from the Arabs of Upper Egypt?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"Do you know 'Abd al-Sattār Bey⁵?"

I didn't know him, so he told me that he was the educational director for the area there and that everyone knew him. I explained to him that I was educated in Cairo and was employed there after my graduation so perhaps that was the reason for my not knowing 'Abd al-Sattār Bey. He shook his head and didn't seem to be convinced by what I'd said. Then I

turned towards the door. The little dark girl was coming towards me cautiously, carrying a glass of lemon juice on a tray. She put the glass down in front of me and went out. He told me "please help yourself", so I told him "you first", but he said he wouldn't drink anything because he was having trouble with his large intestine. He looked the other way. I thought he was annoyed with me for what I'd said, but as I drank the lemon juice he said that he was honoured that I should ask for his daughter's hand, and that he believed I was a sensible person who deserved the best. He added that in those days there were very few wise young men around, then he told me a joke.

"A young man with a beetle hair cut went to the barber's, whereupon the barber sprayed him with DDT."

When he started to laugh at his joke, I gave a restrained laugh too, then thanked him and expressed my hope that he think well of me.

"In reality, my son", he said calmly, "fatherhood does give their daughters freedom. It wasn't like that in our day. Fathers used to arrange everything and all the daughter could do was to marry. However, nowadays fathers educate their daughters and don't take a penny from her once she starts work. She runs down everything her father suggests she marry and in the end she chooses whoever she wants. Nevertheless the father has to tolerate everything. We are, nonetheless, all things considered, a conservative family."

"Of course."

"It goes without saying that Layla isn't like the other girls. Layla could never go against my word. I brought her up and I know her. When she wanted to work I asked her if she was in need of anything. She said she wasn't. So I asked her, if that was the case, why did she want to work? I gave her an education so that she'd have an academic qualification that could be a weapon in her hand if ever anything happened. God forbid! She said: "Daddy, all my girl-friends work ... Please Daddy ... I beg you Daddy". Finally I agreed, but only because she was so insistent."

"Oh, excuse that ..."

I didn't finish

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"Of course, that's ..."

I didn't finish.

"Yes?" he said.

"That's the reason" I said.

"Of course, 'Abd al-Sattār Bey was a colleague of mine in the Teacher Training College, but that's of no relevance since you said you don't know him. However I will say one thing to you and I beg you to listen carefully: I cannot agree to anything that isn't in Layla's best interests."

"Please explain to me what you mean . . ."

"Yes. Actually Layla talked to me about you on more than one occasion. I asked around about you and I know most of the facts ... most of the facts."

He said this and began to search intently in his trouser pockets. I thought he would pull out some specific documents, but in the end he took out a handkerchief and began to wipe his hands and face. Once again he asked me:-

"Shall I open the shutters?"

"If you wish."

He looked at the shutters and then said slowly:-

"When you were at university you lived with your maternal uncle, isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"And now you're living alone?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't understand."

"Why did you leave your uncle's home to live alone?"⁸

"I graduated and it wasn't fitting that I continue to be a burden on him."

"Really? It wasn't because your uncle got angry with you?"

"Absolutely not."

"I'm very pleased to hear that. Please forgive me for asking a somewhat sensitive question and consider me like your father. Is the land in the village registered in your father's or your mother's name?"

"I explained to you, Sir, that we're not rich. It's a small piece of land which my father cultivates and I think it's registered in his name."

"No, I believe it's in your mother's name."

"Perhaps, but I don't understand the meaning of this. I haven't lived in the village and I haven't worked in agriculture."

"Neither have I, but I do understand several things. One plus one equals two. Why didn't you live with one of your paternal uncles in Cairo?"

I said nothing and began to turn the empty glass on the tray round and round; then I came to my senses right away and left the glass in its place.

"Do you consider this to be an important issue, Sir?" I said in a low voice.

"More than you suppose."

"Very well. Actually there is a disagreement between my father and my paternal uncles."

"Perhaps more than a disagreement. Perhaps it's a complete breakdown in relations. Do you know what the cause is?"

"As far as I'm aware they disagreed over the inheritance."

He laughed.

"The inheritance?" he said. "We don't need to worry about that. I believe that you don't know much about this issue. This disagreement, as you call it occurred before you were born and undoubtedly your father didn't talk to you about it. But now, please be honest with me. Everything that's said between us will remain confidential. You're asking to marry my daughter so I have a right to know everything."

"I haven't been lying."

"Yes, you haven't been lying; but now tell me, why did your maternal uncle divorce his wife?"

"Do you believe it was also ..."

"Please, tell the truth."

"Believe me I swear to you I don't know what the reason was. My uncle was very secretive over the matter. I think it was because she didn't produce any children."

"But he stayed with her for ten years without her having children."

"Yes."

"And he didn't marry again after he divorced her; isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"So?"

"Perhaps that wasn't the reason."

Suddenly he leant towards me and grasped my hand which was resting on the little coffee table between us. I trembled as he began to whisper, his face almost sticking to mine.

"Do you mean that you don't know that that it was rumoured that your uncle's wife had an affair with you?"

"That's a lie!" I shouted.

"Please! Lower your voice. I didn't say it's true. Rather, I said rumour had it ..." he said.

"Who said that? It's a lie it's a despicable lie. Whoever said that is a despicable liar."

"Your paternal uncles said that."

"They told you that?"

"Of course not, but I found out. No ... Don't ask me how I found out; but why did they say that?"

"I never knew they'd said that."

"Do you visit your maternal uncle?"

"Sometimes."

"Does he visit you? Or, no ... there's no need for that question. Did your uncle go to the village at all after he got divorced?"

"I don't remember."

"That's an easy matter. He used to visit the countryside once a year, during the holidays, and stay as a guest with your family, in his sister's home."

"Yes."

"When was the last time he went?"

"He hasn't been for for three years not since the year I graduated."

"Yes, right before he got divorced after that he never went again."

"Why?" I asked.

He laughed loudly, revealing shiny clean teeth with no gaps between them. In the midst of his laughter he said:-

"I I am the one who's asking you that question."

I didn't answer and began to stare at the picture of the gondola hanging over his head. It seemed a little dark. When I felt my forehead my hand got drenched with sweat from my face and around my eye-lids. I reached for my shirt collar and tried to open it, but my fingers fumbled over its tight buttons and I contented myself with loosening my neck-tie a little.

"I'll open the shutters," the father said as he tried to stand up, his face looking very solemn.

I reached my hand towards him quickly and said:-

"Please! That's not necessary. What concerns me now is that I know ... what what are you implying exactly?"

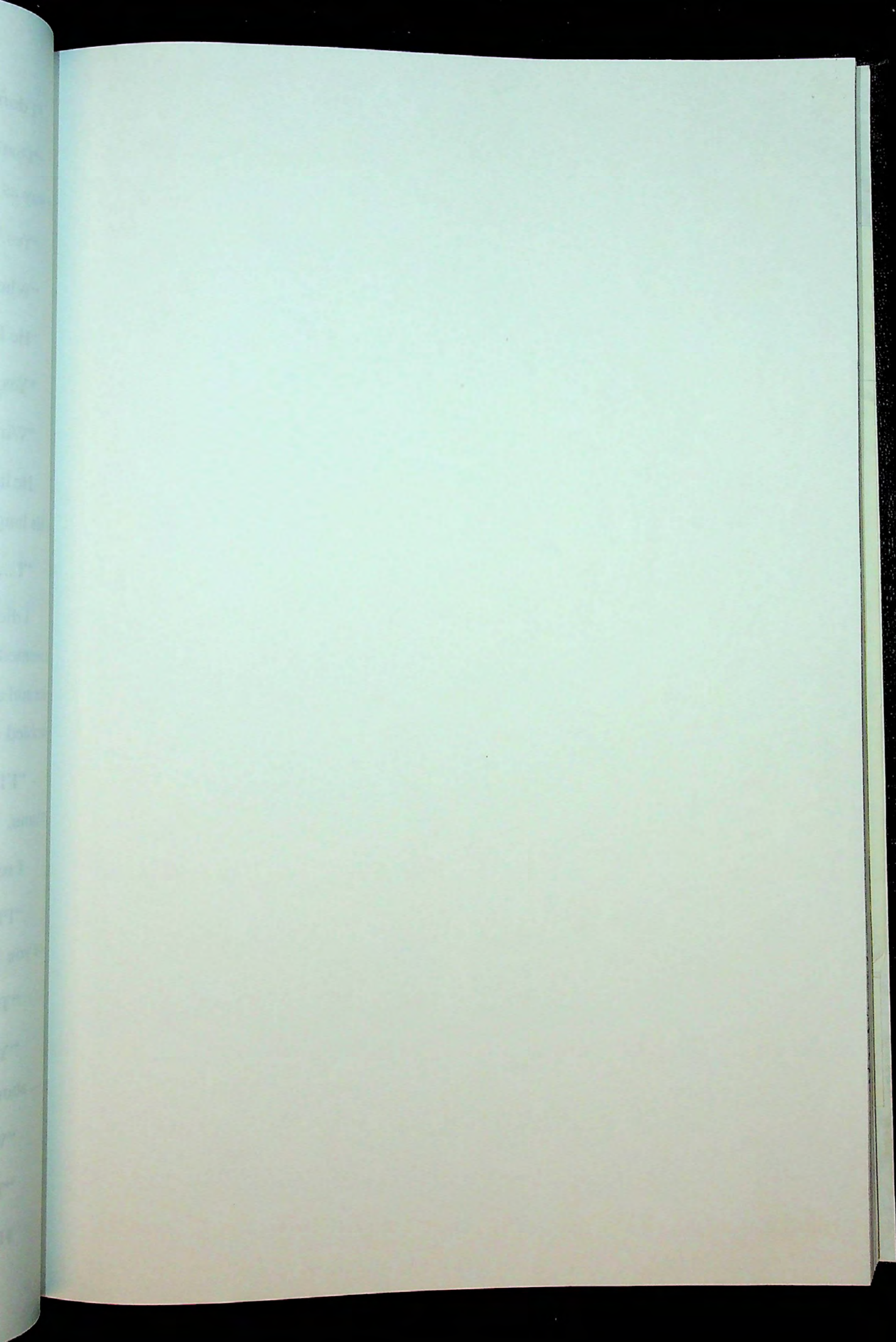
"That must be clear now."

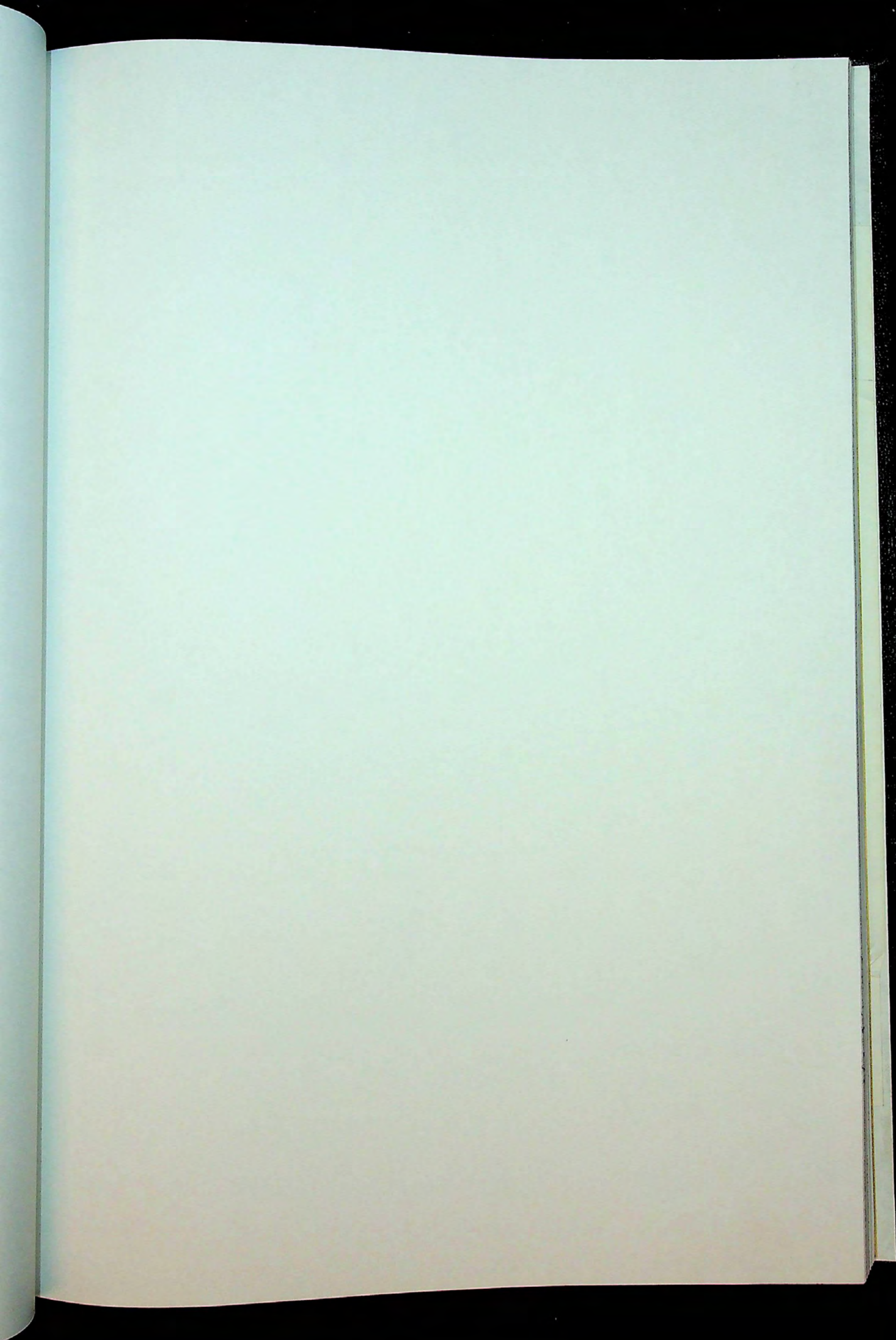
"You want, Sir, to refuse permission for me to get engaged to Layla, so you told me about about these rumours?"

"What rumours?" He said with a hardened look.

"This strange story about my maternal uncle's wife."

He leant towards me again and whispered:-





"I never heard about it."

"That's not evidence ... you say you didn't hear about them, but what's the proof that you didn't?"

"I swear to it."

"That may be so .. nevertheless, you said yourself that your maternal uncle was secretive about the matter. True?"

"Yes."

"So it's inconceivable that he himself should tell you about the matter ... and you're not on speaking terms with your paternal uncles and their children. Rather, you don't even know them, isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"So its not likely that you'd hear about it from them either."

"Would they have been contented to kill me then?"

"I don't know. That's something about which I have no understanding. Of course you don't believe that I made up this story just to tell you that I don't want you as a husband for my daughter ... I could have simply given an excuse."

"So?"

"So the story is true ... I don't mean the story of the relationship, for that's none of my business, but the story of the threats and the divorce. Unless, that is, you have proof to refute it."

"Yes, I have! Of course I have! If it ... if it were true it would have spread everywhere and I would have certainly found out about it. If it were true my paternal uncles would have taken advantage of it to slander my father and I publicly."

"Thereby bringing shame on themselves? No ... They wanted to keep the matter secret, not spread it about."

"So how did you find out about it then? From 'Abd al-Sattār Bey?"

He gave a short laugh and said:-

"Does a man in his position take an interest in these issues? ... No, no."

"So how did you find out?"

"That's my business, but I assure you that it will remain confidential between you and me."

"Why should it remain confidential? Divulge it! Spread those rumours everywhere!"

"I'm not a wicked man. Please! Lower your voice!"

"Why should I lower my voice? Isn't that what you want? You don't want Layla to hear this despicable story, do you? Isn't this your way of separating Layla and me? Well, here I am, I'll do it for you ... I'll tell her myself ... Ha, Ha ... my uncle's wife ... Why shouldn't it be my maternal aunt herself .. or .. or my grandmother for example ... Ha ... Ha ... Ha ..."

He ended his attempts to silence me by standing up and shaking me by the shoulders, saying in a somewhat loud voice:-

"Be a man! If I'd known you'd do this I wouldn't have spoken to you in the first place ... Are you a child? You're a guest in my home."

"Do you want me to leave?"

"No, on the contrary, I want you to be a man and listen to me until I've finished. Shall I bring you a glass of water?"

"No thank-you."

"I'm sorry if I upset you. But believe me, I didn't know that you were unaware of all this."

"I was content with not knowing about it."

He sat down in his seat again opposite me, clasped his fingers together and began to stare at me in silence.

"I apologize for what I said," I told him.

"I appreciate how you feel," he said, signaling with his hand to emphasize it.

"Thank-you. Would you allow me to leave?" I said as I got up.

He got up again and put his hand on my shoulder until I sat down.

"No. We haven't finished talking yet," he said.

"If I've understood what you said then you consider me to be an ill-reputed person and you don't want me to marry your daughter. I cannot refute that bad reputation because I don't have the necessary evidence to do so."

"I didn't say that you have a bad reputation. Let's say that you're victim of rumours."

"There's no difference."

"Moreover, I didn't say that I reject you as a husband for my daughter."

"Then what is the meaning of all this?"

"Please understand me ... I'm seriously concerned for my daughter's best interests."

"Why don't you talk frankly?"

"OK ... so you want the truth? OK ... you know that at the bank, in a job such as yours, a person's reputation is the most important thing."

"Again? Are you alluding again?"

"No, but ..."

"Impossible. I will absolutely not accept any allusions of that kind. Say what you know. Say what you know. I'm not concerned about anything."

"Please! ..."

"What about work? There's nothing which would damage my reputation at work. If you're referring to the accusation of breaching trust, I was acquitted. The legal investigations department itself acquitted me and the case was dismissed ... They were satisfied with issuing a warning."

"I swear to you, I wasn't referring to that. On the contrary, I have no knowledge of it."

"Enough. This way of dealing with things won't work with me anymore. So long as your alluding to that then make sure you know: It was a carefully planned plot They took

advantage of my good will and slipped me papers which I knew nothing about. The investigations department itself found that out. If it had been breaching trust, I would have been imprisoned. Are you listening to me? That's clear However, the investigations department gave me a warning because they said that my good will was considered to be a kind of negligence. Are you listening to me?"

"Yes, yes. I'm listening to you."

"I'm not a thief."

"I'm not accusing you of being one. Are you crying?"

"No, why should I cry? It's sweat. Sweat See!"

"So why don't you want me to open the shutters?" he said, getting up from his seat. I couldn't see him clearly, nor could I see anything of the picture except red and yellow colours.

"I didn't say I don't want you to open them," I said. "I told you I don't care about that. ... I don't care whether you open them or not. I just want to know what you want."

He put his hand in his trouser pocket. Hesitantly he offered me his handkerchief.

"Thank-you, but I have a handkerchief with me," I told him.

I began to wipe the sweat from my face carefully, across my forehead and around my eyes. When I'd finished he'd disappeared out of my sight. He wasn't anywhere in the room, but I was confronted by the painting with its two sailors and their indistinguishable faces. Then I found him standing in front of me, handing me a glass of water. I took a gulp of water and noticed, when he sat down again opposite me, that tiny drops of sweat were visible on his wrinkled white forehead. His face was pale and we remained silent. After a while I spoke. I was surprised that the tone of my voice came out so high-pitched:-

"The gondola should be in Venice."

"I beg your pardon," he said. "What did you say?"

I pointed to the painting and said:-

"That picture ... The gondola should be in Venice, I mean, in the city. But that picture puts it in the countryside. I mean, that's wrong."

As he sat, he turned round and began to contemplate the picture that was hanging behind his back as if he were seeing it for the first time. Then he turned round to me and said:-

"Yes, you're right. Are you well-read in art?"

"No, but we studied it in history at school."

"I studied it too, but I'd not noticed."

Then he said in an unexpectedly harsh tone:-

"Listen to me Layla loves you."

"And I've come to ask you for her hand."

"Put yourself in my place. You're her father. Would you accept?"

"You could have said that from the very beginning. I'm sorry. I will never trouble you or Layla again. I'll say you refused."

He leant towards me and whispered quickly:-

"No. No. No, I don't want you to say that exactly."

"I beg you - precisely what do you want?"

"Well, let's talk plainly as you suggested ... There are certain stories or rumours about you, about which you wouldn't want anyone to know."

"Yes."

"If those stories about you were spread about at your work or even amongst your friends they could cause you harm."

"Yes."

"Even Layla herself could be affected by them ... She might believe them."

"So ...?"

"As far as I'm concerned I will never say anything ... I promise you that ... but I beg you to co-operate with me."

"Co-operate? Over what? Would you be so kind as ... Would ..."

"Please, don't laugh. I really need your help. If I were to tell Layla that I'd rejected you

she would cling on to you even more. I'm convinced of that. She would hate me and I might find myself compelled to tell her everything."

"I understand. Should I say then, that I'm the one who rejected her?"

"No, that's no good either. Tell her that I accepted ... that I made another appointment with you to come to an agreement, after a week or two."

"What?"

"There are ways. You understand these things much better than me ... There are girls in the bank and girls outside the bank, (then he put his hand over his mouth as he laughed,) and as far as I know, you know how to behave with girls."

"You want me to ..."

He interrupted me, gesticulating with his hand:-

"You know very well what I want. There are a thousand ways you can convince Layla that you've abandoned the idea of marriage; but let's not talk about that. Do you know Mr. 'Abd al-Fatih, the head of the department of annulments at the bank?"

"Yes. What's he got to do with the subject?"

"He has nothing to do with it. He's an old friend. Actually, between you and me, he's the one who appointed Layla to the bank. He's a very kind and helpful man. I heard from him that they want to open a branch of the bank in Heliopolis and that they want a manager for the branch of ... What level are you? I mean, how many years have you been at the bank?"

"Just a minute, please. Are you proposing to bribe me? Is that the issue? I get promotion in return for leaving Layla?"

His face grew rigid once more and he said:-

"Why should I want to bribe you? What do you have to harm me? I'm offering you a favour in return for a favour. It's in my best interests that you move away from the place where Layla's working. It's in your best interests that you work in the new branch."

"Why?"

"You yourself said a moment ago that your employment record isn't completely clean. This is an opportunity to regain your recognition."

"Listen, please! ... Don't try to ..."

"I'm not trying anything ... You're trying to break your promise. You're more dangerous than I thought."

"What promise? Listen, I'll never give in to threats. I love Layla and she loves me. I'll tell her everything and she'll understand. Are you listening to me? That's what I'll do."

He closed his eyes and bent over in his chair. The tiny drops of sweat had concentrated side by side like crystals, in the folds of his wrinkled forehead, until it looked like the surface of an ice-cold glass. He laughed softly and shook his head with his eyes closed.

"Yes, yes," he said. "I'm familiar with this kind of courage. I've known many people in my life who've refused to listen to sense; you can buy ten for a penny now, but believe me that isn't courage; courage is knowing what's next after this and accepting it."

"I do know what's coming and I accept it."

"No. You don't know anything."

"On the contrary, I know. You can bring my reputation at work into disrepute, and perhaps you can have me transferred to another area; you can fill Layla's head with doubts about me ..."

"I can do more than that, believe me. I can spread rumours around that your paternal uncles have been keen to keep hidden. Then no one would ever guess what your uncles might do, or your father, or your maternal uncle ..."

"But that's impossible."

"What's impossible?"

"You can't do that."

"Why not?"

"You can do what you want with me. Transfer me, or kill me; but what brought my relatives into this?"

"But you want to ruin my daughter ... *my daughter*. So why should I care about people who are strangers to me? Think about it. Think hard about it. Do you suppose I'll hesitate? Look at me! By the way, do you know that your uncle once tried to commit suicide?"

"Please! Be quiet!"

"That was right after his divorce. No one in the family knew about it."

"What exactly do you want from me?"

"They took him to hospital in a critical condition, but ..."

"Please! Be quiet! I'll do everything you want, but please be quiet!"

He sat back in his chair and said:-

"I judged you from the start to be a sensible person. No, don't get up now. Dry your sweat before you go out. You might catch a cold outside."

I dried my sweat before going out. However, as I was going down the stairs my foot slipped and I fell on my face. I got up quickly and began to clean the dust off my clothes and body. I leant for a while on the handle to the big front door until I'd calmed down. The handle was copper and shaped like a like a big, closed flower.

Outside the house it was night-time and windy. The cars were moving by slowly behind one another; on the back of each were two red lights. I stood and waited. It wasn't cold there. Finally, when there were no more cars, I crossed to the opposite pavement. There was a barber's shop there which was full of mirrors. I saw myself. I saw the dust on my sleeve and a big swollen graze on my forehead. I felt the graze with my hand. The skin was torn, but there was no blood. The barber was standing propped up against the door with his hands in his white jacket pocket. I became aware of him as he looked at me with concern. When our gaze met he told me to come in and take some cotton wool, then he started to laugh to himself and turned his face away from me. I didn't answer. I took my hand off my forehead quickly and crossed the street again. I cleaned my sleeve well in front of the door. I glanced at my reflection in the shiny copper flower, then started to climb the stairs again. (1968)

NOTES ON THE TEXT

1. Using a cream and 'after-shave'.
2. The average price of a hair-cut at this time was 15 piastres. (100 piastres = 1 pound).
3. "Bawwāb" : Literally this means 'doorman', but a doorman's responsibility in Egypt goes beyond that of standing at the door to check who enters the building. In Egypt he will also run errands for the occupants of the flats, do odd jobs and be in charge of the general building maintenance.
4. "Khamasīn" winds : These are hot southerly winds in Egypt that come during springtime. They can be quite strong, and carry a lot of dust and sand particles.
5. "Bey" : An old title of courtesy, not used in Egypt much these days. It signifies someone of important standing and in a position of power in society.
6. Beatles : A term used to describe youths with long hair and a shabby appearance, after the Beatles of the 1960's.

It was a warm winter morning after some cold days on which it had poured with rain in a way which rarely happens in the village. In the house yard the chicks ran about, chirping joyfully over the sun which engulfed them as they flapped their short, golden-feathered wings. Nevertheless, when Umm Idris heard the dog bark outside the house, her heart missed a beat. Who would come at such a time as this? Scarcely an hour had passed since Ramadan and the children had gone out to the land. It wasn't possible that one of them should come back now; so had something happened to 'Aziz at school? He walks like a stray, at home and on the street. Had something happened to him? Your protection, O God! Last night we had had a frightening dream in which she couldn't remember. However, she thought there had been raw words to the dream. She wasn't completely sure, but perhaps there had been raw words in it. Your protection, O God!

SUNDUS

When Mubarka stood in front of her and said: "Besides the gipsy is at the door," she smiled and said to herself:

"That's all I needed! Sundus' eyes and poison are one and the same." However, she pushed Mubarka away and, pecking out her head from the dark inner room, she said:

"Come in, come in, Sundus."

Sundus came in over the threshold, her right foot first, and said:

"In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate. May goodness come to those who are good."

She was carrying her old box on her head, balancing it with her left hand, whilst a big bundle of material, tied with a knot, hung down from her elbow. In her right hand she held her long stick. She faced Umm Idris, half of whose thin body was protruding from the room. She put her box, her bundle and her stick on the floor and reached to take Umm Idris' hand. She bent over her hand, wanting to kiss it, but Umm Idris pushed her in the chest, forcibly pulling her hand away and saying:

"Get away, you infidel! Don't urge me near the punishment of your sins. You needn't be a dear friend."

Sundus was content to lean over and kiss both her shoulders. As she sat down on the floor in front of the door to the room, which opened out into the sunny courtyard of the house, she said:

It was a warm winter morning after some cold days on which it had poured with rain in a way which rarely happens in the village. In the house yard the chicks ran about, cheeping joyfully over the sun which engulfed them as they flapped their short, golden-feathered wings. Nevertheless, when Umm Idrīs heard the dog bark outside the house, her heart missed a beat. Who would come at such a time as this? Scarcely an hour had passed since Ramadan and the children had gone out to the land. It wasn't possible that one of them should come back now; so had something happened to 'Azūz at school? He walks like a stray, at home and on the street. Had something happened to him on the way? Your protection, O God! Last night she had had a frightening dream which she couldn't remember. However, she thought there had been raw meat in the dream. She wasn't completely sure, but perhaps there had been raw meat in it. Your protection, O God!

When Mubarka stood in front of her and said:- "Sundus the gipsy is at the door," she sighed and said to herself:-

"That's all I needed! Sundus' eyes and poison are one and the same."¹ However, she pushed Mubarka away and, peeking out her head from the dark inner room, she said:-

"Come in, come in, Sundus."

Sundus came in over the threshold, her right foot first, and said:-

"In the name of God, the Merciful and the Compassionate. May goodness come to those who are good."

She was carrying her old box on her head, balancing it with her left hand, whilst a big bundle of material, tied with a knot, hung down from her elbow. In her right hand she held her long stick. She faced Umm Idrīs, half of whose thin body was protruding from the room. She put her box, her bundle and her stick on the floor and rushed to take Umm Idrīs' hand. She bent over her hand, wanting to kiss it, but Umm Idrīs pushed her in the chest, forcibly pulling her hand away and saying:-

"Get away, you infidel! Don't make me bear the punishment of your sins. You mean you're a dear friend?"

Sundus was content to lean over and kiss both her shoulders. As she sat down on the floor in front of the door to the room which opened out into the sunny courtyard of the house, she said:-

"Yes indeed! By God I'm a dear friend, and my God knows."

Umm Idrīs sat on the threshold to the room. Two wide steps raised it off ground level. She confronted Sundus, saying:-

"Call yourself a dear friend and we only see you at harvest time! Your head told you you'd go and see them after the maize crop. You go to people's homes and ask about their health and their circumstances, but when it comes to us, we only see you at harvest time. How many times have you been to Hajj Yūsuf's house?"²

Sundus was listening to these words with her head bowed. She was weary this morning. The bundle and the box in her hands had felt heavy on the way.

She realized she hadn't had breakfast yet. She'd have breakfast in this home in a short while. They'd bring her tea and a wheat loaf, and some baked eggs.³ As for now, the course of action was, as usual, a difficult one when it came to Umm Idrīs. How should she begin?

She bent over to open her bundle and said with a laugh:-

"May your good fortune continue, Umm Idrīs, and I'll ask about you at weddings.⁴ Today I have goods for you that are, God willing, all for weddings."

Umm Idrīs shook her head and said:-

"Have you come to me after you've finished with your dear friends, Sundus?"

However, Sundus started to take the folded clothes out of her big bundle. As she did this she felt a pair of eyes staring at her. Mubarka was standing silently beside her without moving. She was gazing at Sundus' green eyes, surrounded by thick black eye-liner, and her round white face. When she threw back her veil Mubarka saw her shiny yellow hair and crescent-shaped gold ear-rings in her ears which almost reached down to her shoulders.⁵ When Sundus turned to her, Mubarka said:-

"You're beautiful Sundus, and so are your ear-rings."

Sundus laughed again and said:-

"In the name of God, you're the one who's beautiful.⁶ My goodness how beautiful! May God keep away the evil eye! You've grown Mubarka." Then she turned to her mother and said:-

"Her eyes are big and beautiful like those of a cow."⁷

When Sundus started to unfold a blue silk garment and display it over her arm, Umm Idrīs signalled secretly to Mubarka with her hand to go away; but the little girl squatted beside the gipsy and began to scratch her head. Sundus noticed what the mother had done but didn't show it. However, now she knew what she needed to do.

Sundus held up the folded garment with her left hand and displayed the blue material with gold stripes; then she spread it over her right hand and began to shake it.

"What do you say, most expert of women? Have you seen anyone with anything like this," she said in a proud tone.

But Umm Idrīs looked away and said disinterestedly:-

"Don't trouble yourself, Sundus. I'll not purchase anything, even for a small measure of wheat. The land didn't produce this year."

Sundus turned to Mubarka and continued to shake the material, saying:-

"Are you going to withhold the beautiful dress from this beautiful bride?"

"This little Miss!" said the mother.

"This moon!" said Sundus. "Wait until she develops two breasts like pomegranates. Men's minds will go wild after her."

Then she put the blue dress aside and began to unfold a cotton garment with red flowers printed on it.

"What about this yellow dress you're hiding under the other dresses. Why are you hiding it Sundus? For whom are you hiding it?" said Umm Idrīs in an irritated voice.

"What's hidden behind the pupil of the eye, I'll spread out for Umm Idrīs," said Sundus, "and I'll spread out my cheek for her so that she can walk on it."

But Umm Idrīs got up suddenly and rushed towards her daughter who was rubbing her eyes. Seizing her by the hand she said:-

"You little Miss! You'll be the death of your family! All day in the dust. You put your hands in the dust and your hands in your eyes! No drops of any mediator are of any use ..."

She hit her on the back and the girl ran as fast as she could into the house, crying. The chickens that had gathered into one group in the sunshine scattered and began to run around the yard in all directions uttering high-pitched, frightened noises.

Sundus said to the mother who had sat down on the threshold to the room again:-

"Don't hit her Umm Idrīs. She's no longer a little girl. Another year or two and prospective bridegrooms will come for her. They'll be enchanted by the beauty of her eyes."

Umm Idrīs pursed her lips and as she gasped for breath, she told the gipsy:-

"Don't trouble yourself, Sundus. I told you I'll not buy anything, not even for a cup of wheat. Hide the yellow dress from me? Hide the pretty things for your dear friends? I'll not buy anything, not even for a handful of wheat."

As Sundus removed the yellow dress which, apart from its corner, was invisible under the rest of the dresses, she said:-

"God forbid, Umm Idrīs! Do you suspect the loyalty of your servant and your slave? By God, this dress is for you and I'll not take anything for it. It's a gift from me to Mubarka...."

She threw the dress down next to the mother saying :-

"By God, this one's on me. The valuable thing for the valuable girl, Umm Idrīs."

Umm Idrīs got up again, saying:-

"Your ways will never work with me, Sundus. May the tea poison you and afterwards God will resolve things."

However, as she went off, her mind was busy ... What could be done to avert that accursed eye from Mubarka?

At midday what few clouds there were, had disappeared. The morning sun had turned into a burning scorcher. The chickens took refuge in the shade and their voices died down. Sundus was also sitting in the shade, propping her back up against the wall, her legs stretched out and holding a glass of tea in her hand. She embraced Mubarka with her other hand as they sat alone in silence.

Sundus had had breakfast. She'd sold the yellow dress, the blue striped dress, and the dress with the flowers printed on it. She'd sold a teapot and some china plates from her box. Umm Idrīs had drunk a cup of coffee and Sundus had read the coffee dregs for her. She saw from them that the land would produce a lot, that Umm Idrīs would go on the pilgrimage to Mecca, the house of God, and there was the fine attire for her return! 'Azūz would pass his

exams that year in school. Umm Idrīs had listened attentively to her, supporting her chin in her hand, her body shaking at the words which fell from Sundus' lips. However, after the gipsy had finished, she told her:- "Azūz is stupid, it would be better for him to leave school and work on the land with his father and brothers."

Mubarka looked up from Sundus' lap and asked her:-

"Why do you always carry that long stick, Sundus?"

"To chase away the dogs with it, Mubarka," said Sundus. "I move about from house to house all day long and the dogs don't know me. If I didn't have the stick with me, the dogs would bite me."

"But you're the most beautiful woman in the village, Sundus!" said Mubarka. "Why don't you marry and stay at home?"

Sundus laughed and kissed Mubarka. The mother was coming back, carrying a small bundle of two wheat loaves and some baked eggs. When Sundus saw her, she moved her hand away from Mubarka. Umm Idrīs was telling her daughter:-

"You've come back, you shame-faced girl!"

Mubarka got up, ran and hid in the house.

When the gipsy got up, Umm Idrīs helped her to put the box on her head. As she headed for the door she interceded for Umm Idrīs and the Hajj and the children. She remembered Mubarka and the next time she'd come to that house, so she stopped and said:-

"May God preserve Mubarka for you and may you rejoice to see her married, Hajja⁹. How the girl's grown! But she's like a shrivelled stick of corn. Take her to the doctor! Not long now and the one who shapes all girls, will shape her up nicely. Who would desire a girl like a stick of corn?"

The gipsy went out; the mother heard the dog barking and Sundus shouting at him as she drove him away. She sighed. Nevertheless she called Mubarka. Pulling the girl by her neck, she went to the stove. She took a piece of mastic out of her black galabeya pocket, took two coals out with the tongs and made Mubarka step over them both seven times...

NOTES TO THE TEXT

1. Umm Idrīs is here thinking of the "evil eye" - a prevalent superstitious belief, particularly amongst the lower classes in Egypt. A jealous look, or a compliment made particularly about one's children, is believed to have power to bring evil to the person to whom it is directed.
2. Hajj : Literally translated means the man who has been on the pilgrimage. It is also used as a general term of respect for older men. The female equivalent is Hajja.
3. Baked eggs: eggs cooked in the hot embers of an open fire.
4. Sundus is alluding to the marriage of Umm Idrīs' daughter, Mubarka.
5. The description here is of a particular type of Egyptian country woman, generally looked down on by society as leading a wayward lifestyle. At the same time such women have great power over the people around whom they live.
6. A person wishing to make a compliment without casting the 'evil eye' on someone, will always say 'in the name of God', preceding or following the compliment.
7. Here Sundus deliberately throws out a comment that will be taken as 'casting the evil eye' on Mubarka.
8. People from poorer classes especially will regularly visit saints' tombs to seek the saints' mediation between them and God for the well-being and success of themselves and their families.
9. Hajja : see note 2.

THE TRIAL OF THE PRIEST KĀY-NAN

An introduction is necessary. In the time of civil strife that accompanied Akhenaton's rule, the movement of sun worship and all that went with it, the priest Kāy-Nān was one of the most famous experimenters and authorities on the sun doctrine. He was so famous that at that time he was given the distinguished title of "Master of the light whose power is dependant on the sun of the sun chosen by the god Amen (that is the god of Akhenaton himself)." Kāy-Nān was a native of Thebes. The research suggested Amenon's residence in Thebes. Kāy-Nān was associated with the city of Thebes, the center of the ancient god Ra's worship. He charged anyone who came to him with proof that in the days of those high priests, Ra used to be worshipped in Thebes in no other way except with respect to his being the eye of the red sky.

Nevertheless, the thing which caused his contemporaries in those days, was that Kāy-Nān had himself been the one who presented his well-known papyrus report about "al-Ban-Ban" (that peak in the shape of a pyramid at the top of obelisks in the Pharaoh Amenhotep III's temple, before the civil strife began. In that report he proved that "al-Ban-Ban" is the symbol of eternal truth that is loved by the gods, and that the lords accept and reward it. Kāy-Nān said: "with a reward that surpasses the reward for any sacrifice, even if one has slaughtered a hundred bulls fattened on fodder from the province of Wāsi, or whether one has built ten temples with stones brought from the land of Bēni.")

Of course the result of this report was that thousands of obelisks grew like palm trees all over Egyptian soil (provinces "Tanīn" and as it was in those days.) Amongst them were these shining obelisks in the land of the temples of Thebes whose "Ban-Ban" were covered with gold with Amenhotep himself had consecrated and presented, sending up prayers to the gods. Provincial governors competed with one another to erect another kind of obelisk, as "Ban-Ban" covered in silver. Indeed, it was said that the poor used to put a wooden stick up in front of their houses, on which simple copper "Ban-Ban" would sway to please the gods and reward.

An introduction is necessary. In the time of civil strife that accompanied Akhnaton's¹ rule, the innovator of sun worship and all that went with it, the priest Kay-Nān was one of the most famous expositors and authorities on the sun doctrine. He was so famous that at that time he was given the distinguished title of "Manifestor of the lights whose power is dependant on the arm of the one chosen by the god Aton,² (that is, the arm of Akhnaton himself.) Kāy-Nan merited this eminent award as a result of his theological research, entitled:- "The unity of the light shrines from Ra³ to Aton." The research silenced Ammon's⁴ priests. In his report, Kāy-Nan mentioned the city of On, the cradle of the ancient god Ra's revelation. He challenged anyone who came to him with proof that in the days of those righteous ancestors, Ra used to be worshipped in On in an other way except with respect to its being the eye of the red sky.

Nevertheless, the thing which confused his contemporaries in those days, was that Kāy-Nan had himself been the one who presented his well-known papyrus report about "al-Bun-Bun" (that peak in the shape of a pyramid at the top of obelisks) to the Pharaoh Ammonhetep III⁵, before the civil strife began. In that report he proved that "al-Bun-Bun" is the symbol of eternal truth that is loved by the gods, and that the lords accept and reward it, Kāy-Nan said:- "with a reward that surpasses the reward for any sacrifice, even if one has slaughtered a thousand bulls fattened on fodder from the province of Wāsīt, or whether one has built ten temples with stones brought from the land of Būnt."

Of course the result of this report was that thousands of obelisks grew like palm trees all over Egyptian soil (protected "Tamīra" soil as it was in those days.) Amongst them were those stunning obelisks in the land of the temples of Thebes⁶ whose "Bun-Buns" were covered with gold which Ammonhetep himself had consecrated and presented, sending up prayers to the gods. Provincial governors competed with one another to erect another kind of obelisk, its "Bun-Buns" covered in silver. Indeed, it was said that the poor used to put a wooden stick up in front of their houses, on which simple copper "Bun-Buns" would sway to procure blessing and reward.

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Kāy-Nan will defend himself with quotations from that report later on. However, for the time being these few lines will suffice to explain the atmosphere in which Kāy-Nan was brought from prison situated in the land of the temples in Thebes. This was after the civil strife had been suppressed and the old gods were re-established on their thrones from which Akhnaton had deposed them. Kāy-Nan had to stand before Ammon's priests in Thebes, which itself was called "Ammon's land".

(2)

From the first moment at the trial Kāy-Nan adopted an aggressive attitude. The three judging priests sat on their golden seats. No sooner had the man who sat squatting on his heels started to record the meeting's proceedings than Kāy-Nan shouted in a thunderous voice:- "O false priests .."

The judges started with shock. As a result ^{he} was given a thorough beating with the holy cudgel. When the blood flowed from his nose he was taken back to the prison.

(3)

The high-priest Siminkh-Ammon's room overlooked the holy temple's lake, surrounded by palm and sycamore trees. It was filled with the fragrance of incense. The three priests sat inside in consultation. Their heads were completely shaved and their soft skin shone like the white linen of the garments they were wearing and the golden bracelets on their wrists which were adorned with turquoise scarab beetles. The three of them were agitated following the stormy beginning to the trial. Nevertheless, Siminkh-Ammon maintained an outward serenity. The high priest (whose official title was:- "The one who gazes constantly at Ammon's lights in the East and the West;" (what follows is not intended to mock him in any way but he really was cross-eyed) looked towards the others (perhaps) and said "What is to be done, O honourable gentlemen?"

Tarībīt-Ammon, the high priest of religious chanting (his official title was "The one who blows far to please the ears of the heavens") said:-

"Kāy-Nan has committed a flagrant crime. He's not like the ordinary infidels who appeared with Aton, rather he was a well known priest to Ammon, then he forsook his god. Thus it isn't enough to destroy him by cutting off his limbs in the usual way like the rest of Aton's priests. His case in particular must be an example to warn all those whose soul entices them to infidelity against Ammon."

For this reason he put forward the following suggestion:- "Kāy-Nan should be put into very salty water for a number of days until his body swells, then he should be put into hot sun for a day until he dries out. After that you can cut his limbs slowly into small pieces with a blunt knife, then roast them and force him to eat them. Before he breathes his last he should be fried in boiling oil, then his body should be burnt to cinders."

The priest of the treasuries, Bāt-Ammon, was listening and shaking his head (one of his life's sorrows was that he didn't have an official title. He'd once suggested to the priests' assembly that, in accordance with his high-ranking responsibilities as guardian of god's treasure and supervisor over the priests' food supply and over Ammon's library, he should be called by the concise title of:- "The Eye of Ammon lowered onto Earth." However the assembly received his suggestion unenthusiastically and in complete silence, so he remained simply:- "priest of the treasuries.")

Bāt-Ammon said that he praised the contributions of his colleague "The one who blows far" and that he considered them to be divine revelations from Ammon, that would not surprisingly come from a revered person such as him. However, Bāt-Ammon had a few comments. To begin with, he thought that the roasting of the limbs should precede their being cut off, and secondly, he had reservations about his remains being fried in oil, since that would be considered a useless waste of the gods' oil.

He asked permission to burn him in the middle of dried corn-sticks. Finally he asked permission for his cremation to be completed before he'd totally lost consciousness, rather than before he breathed his last, in order to achieve the desired purpose. Then he raised his finger and said:- "But I wonder, has pity nevertheless overcome us? Are we going to forget the worst punishment of all?"

The other two looked at him questioningly, so he said slowly, stressing his words:- "I specifically suggest, O honourable gentlemen, that the burial of his ashes on any land that has

been blessed by the holy religious ceremonies of the gods be absolutely prohibited. That is the real punishment."

Tarībīt was delighted by these additions. His features beamed with joy. He warmly congratulated his colleague, saying that these were the true revelations from Ammon. He agreed to every word that had been said. He apologised that he'd overlooked those points. Then he saluted his colleague by straightening out his arm in a horizontal position and raising it slightly as he spread out his palm (this was the familiar Ammonite greeting used specifically by the priests):- "Great Bāt! Great Bāt!" he said. Bāt responded to his colleague's appreciation by straightening out his arm in the same way and humbly saying:- "Great Ammon! Great Ammon!"⁷

However, the high priest was following all this in silence. When they had both finished he shook his head and said sorrowfully:- "It seems, Sirs, that you haven't grasped the gravity of the situation." He turned his head and looked far away, gazing sadly to the East and to the West.

(4)

Even in the days of civil strife under Akhnaton, nobody had laid a finger on the high priest Siminkh-Ammon. He was well known for his asceticism and his generosity and all the people loved him. From time to time he would hold banquets in front of the temples. There he would serve many roast ducks and roast geese which had been reared on the lakes of the holy temple, besides the rest of the sacrificial bulls. These were served to people after the hearts, kidneys and cloven hooves which had been consecrated to god, had been torn out.

Akhnaton was prudent in that he left Siminkh-Ammon alone. The chief of police, however, was judicious in that he put him under house-arrest, warning him not to promote the observation of any Ammonite lights. By way of precautionary measures, the chief of police put forty two of his strongest spies around Siminkh-Ammon's house, carefully choosing those who had sharp hearing and were skilled at climbing house walls, besides their ignorance of hieroglyphic reading and writing so that they could report what they heard without additions or abridgements. All that, along with the similarity between what they said

and what the houseservants and those who visited the house frequently said. As for Siminkh himself, he didn't need those warnings or precautionary measures. The man stayed at home patiently, personifying the old Egyptian proverb "No Ibis bird ascended and flew without falling back down."⁸

Thus, when Akhnaton fell and the glory of Ammon's lights and the freedom to watch them returned, Siminkh didn't feel any malicious joy over the heretical Pharaoh or Kāy-Nan himself. On the contrary, in actual fact he was grieved because Kāy-Nan had been his colleague in their student days at the priests' institute and they had been friends a long time back. All that Siminkh had wanted to prove was that Ammon was great and that the ancient gods alone were the truth.

In order to re-assure the honourable priests Tarībīt and Bāt, Siminkh told them that he wouldn't refuse to sign any sentence passed on Kāy-Nan. However that wasn't the point. Then he said:-

"O honourable, revered gentlemen, I understand what Kāy-Nan is attempting to do. He doesn't care what we tell him or what we ourselves do to him, rather he's addressing the generations that will come after us. Priest Bāt, you know better than I that our holy laws prescribe that priests' trials must be recorded on papyrus and kept in the temple library. How will the coming generations view Ammon's priests if all that is written on the court's papyrus is the phrase:- "O false priests...."? The problem isn't whether we execute him and roast his limbs before they're cut off or afterwards, but rather where we'll hide our faces on the day we meet Ammon? What will we say when that ominous papyrus is in the library of his temple?"

Bāt-Ammon smiled to himself. He didn't tell him that the papyrus of priests' trials specifically, along with the papyrus inventories and temple contracts were being used to provide heat on winter nights. They made a fine fire and left no traces. From this perspective, no one could blame them for Kāy-Nan's immediate punishment and execution. Bāt feared the consequences of such a secret as this being divulged to a such simple man as Siminkh-Ammon who stuck to the rules, so he endeavoured to put on a serious face, asking:-

"So what are you driving at, high priest?"

Siminkh-Ammon said:- "Kāy-Nan must be given the opportunity to say what he wants. We have to silence him with evidence so that Ammon will be pleased with us and so that our reputation will remain untarnished in the face of the future generations ..." Bāt looked at Tarībīt meaningfully as he repeated after the high priest:- "The future generations!" Tarībīt gave Bāt the same meaningful look. They hardly suppressed their anger.

(5)

The court proceedings confirmed the doubts which had beset Bāt and Tarībīt. Kāy-Nan's words were jumbled and confused. They didn't keep to any kind of logic. What was the meaning, for example, of his insistence on Ra being Ammon and Ammon being Aton and Aton being Horus? ... What was the meaning of his statement that Ra is the god who is found on the western horizon? How could he say that god looks at the heart of man, rather than looking at what sacrifices are in his grave? However, Tarībīt's doubts reached a climax when Kāy-Nan said that this Ra Ammon Aton Horus didn't delight over many temples being built but rather he rejoiced when many people were rejoicing ...

Tarībīt was wont to see Kāy-Nan as being a comical person on the whole. He was tall, as skinny as a rake and dark-skinned. He had a blank stare across his face and most of the time he was in a stupor. Now, however, he was standing between his two guards, his eyes bulging. He had been forbidden to shave his hair according to priestly fashion, so it had grown like hedgehog spikes on the top of his head. Blue bruises had come up on his forehead and clots of blood caused his garment to stick to his body in the places where he'd been punished with the holy cudgel. (That is the special holy cudgel in the temple prison, thus called because of the hard bulges present on its holy rod). That is what he looked like as he talked about how his god rejoiced when mankind rejoiced, gesticulating with his hands. In Tarībīt's eyes he seemed like the madmen of the goddess Hathur⁹ who walked behind the processions on the day of her feast, doing strange things.

At this point the priest of chanting decided to assume control over the situation, so he addressed the accused, saying:-

"Criminal Kāy! What month of the year are we in?"

Kāy-Nan looked at him for a moment and said:- "Isn't it the month of Bashans? Why?"

Tarībīt turned to Bāt and whispered:- "Fancy that! He knows!"

Bāt asked permission to continue the accused's interrogation. "Infidel Kāy! You say that Ra is Ammon who is Aton who is Horus. Isn't that so?" Bāt said to him.

"Yes," said Kāy-Nan.

"Great," said Bāt. "If that is the case then the holy goddess (Mūt) is the wife of which one of them?... Is it reasonable, infidel, that she be wife to the four gods? Or is she still the wife of just the holy Ammon, as we know? If that is the case, you fool, then are the other three gods still celibate? ... Speak!"

He didn't speak. When Bāt had silenced Kāy-Nan he returned to his seat and raised his forearm, jingling his bracelets. Then he laughed.

Tarībīt, however, wasn't satisfied and continued to test the accused's mind. He decided to give him a mathematics test, since this was the glory of the priests:-

"Boy Kāy!" he said. "A hen lays three eggs every two days and one egg on the fourth day. Then it doesn't lay an egg for two days, on the third day it lays an egg. How many eggs would we gather from it in a month if the snake consumed four of those eggs in a week?"

When Kāy-Nan looked dumbfounded, Bāt went after him:-

"Here's a simpler problem, you heathen," he said "that doesn't have any maths in it. Is it possible to offer a sacrifice of a bull to god if the bull's cloven hoof has been soiled in ..."

However, at this point it was the high priest Siminkh who shouted:- "Enough ... Enough."

Then he tried to control his voice saying:- "Enough! .. O ... O honourable gentlemen."

The two looked at him in amazement. He, however, was looking in the direction of the squatting scribe who was writing everything on papyrus ... His heart burned with anxiety as he thought of the future generations.

Siminkh-Ammon addressed Kāy-Nan, saying:-

“Priest ...”

Bāt and Tarībīt jumped to their feet.

Tarībīt, who had a voice which could reach far into the distance, couldn't get his words out. “How, high priest, could you address this criminal as “Priest?” He said in a constricted voice.

However, Siminkh said resolutely:- “A priest is a priest until his execution has taken place. Sit down, both of you.”

They sat down, but they jangled their bracelets in a significant way.

Siminkh continued:- “Priest Kāy-Nan, you say that Ra is Ammon who is Atun who is Horus. So is there any objection to us calling him Ammon?”

“You speak the truth, priest ...” said Kāy Nan. “Is there any objection to my calling him Aton ... The important thing is that he remains one.”

“But your Pharoah Akhn ...” said the high priest ...

At this point Bāt and Tarībīt shouted in one breath:- “The infidel Akhn.”

Siminkh shook his head and said:- “The infidel Akhn, this Akhn locked Ammon's temples, along with those of other gods, even though he knew that the people have loved them since ancient times. Even you, priest Kāy, knew the standing of the holy Ra and Ammon. Didn't you say in your report that Ra and Ammon love the “Bun-Buns?”

Bāt and Tarībīt applauded. They raised their arms. They jangled their bracelets. “May you be blessed, high priest,” they said. “You have silenced the infidel.”

Kāy-Nan turned his head and said:- “My friend, look out of this window. There you'll see three obelisks set up by Ammonhetep. During the daytime, there they are, their “Bun-Buns” reflecting the holy sun, spreading shimmering light over Thebes. Their brightness blesses all people indiscriminately, so the heart of the believer worships the light of truth. At night when they shine from afar, they remind the negligent person that god's light is never

absent and that in their peaks they embrace the approaching dawn with its new light. Beside those obelisks you will see the temple which Ammonhetep built with its towering pillars. How beautiful it is too! Its rose-coloured stone came from the Far-East. Nevertheless its holy of holies is hidden in the darkness, dug out in fear and terror. It isn't a light that's given freely to all."

Bāt cheered agitatedly. "There you are, his apostasy has been proved! Let's kill him immediately."

Siminkh, however, said in a commanding voice, without looking at him, "Be quiet!"

As for Kāy-Nan, he continued as if he hadn't heard anything ... "Behind that temple, my friend, though you'll never see it from this window, is the big temple which Thutmosis III¹⁰ built, bringing its stones from the north. To its right is the splendid temple of Hatshepsut¹¹ with its Nubian stones. One thousand boats carried them and fifty thousand arms constructed the temple with them. Tell me, my friend, how many obelisks could be built from the stones of one of those temples to spread their light and their pleasure to all people?"

"You heretical heathen Do you begrudge the gods their temples."

Tarībīt slapped the palms of his hands and said:- "If we don't kill him properly, how can we be safe-guarded against the revenge of almighty god? Hasn't the time come for us to make him a warning to anyone whose soul tells him not to believe in Ammon of the secret names, possessor of vengeance and lightning?"

But at that moment exactly, Kāy-Nan said a statement which resounded in the hall like a thunderbolt. "Gentlemen, will you make your judgement according to Maat's¹² feather?" said Kāy-Nan.

An icy silence descended over the hot hall.

Even the scribe who sat bending over his papyrus raised his head for the first time and looked at Kāy-Nan.

(7)

The sages of our ancestors said that neither a sinner nor even an innocent person would dare to be judged according to a feather of the goddess Maat. She was that beauty who had

remained holy even during the days of civil strife; even if her rank had fallen a little in that she didn't compete with Aton. Nevertheless, Akhnaton himself used to honour her, for she was justice and was truth. She was the straight path which wouldn't bend by a hair's breadth.

There in the court of the western provinces, a dead man's heart was weighed, after it had crossed through the terrors of the after-world, on scales in which that elegant feather of Maat with its black hair was put. If the scales balanced, he had succeeded and would rejoice over meeting Oseris.¹³ If the scales were heavier on the heart's side, the wild beast (Ammot), which squatted beneath the scales, would devour the erring heart and it would be banned from the resurrection heaven forever. But for a person to request that he be put on the scales with her feather during this life on earth ... What boldness he had! Could he imagine that his whole body would sit in one scale pan and Maat's feather in the other and the scales would balance? How? His heart would have to be lighter and purer than a dew drop at dawn.

However, Bāt-Ammon was the first one to come back to his senses. He smiled secretly to himself once again. He remembered that the goddess' feather and her scales came under his responsibility. He remembered that he knew which feather to use and which pans to use to make the scales tilt.

Nevertheless, his smile faded when Kāy-Nan said:- "If you are in agreement, gentlemen, then I request that I be judged according to the goddess' feather in her temple in the city of On."

Bāt knew that he had no authority there. Furthermore, no one had any authority except for Maat's priest whom she would destroy with her lightning instantaneously if he deviated from her path or played with her scales. They exchanged meaningful glances in silence.

Tarībīt, however, cleared his throat in silence and said in a coarse voice, that nevertheless didn't reach very far:- "That request is turned down."

"Why?" said Kāy-Nan.

"Because ... because it ..." said Tarībīt looking at Bāt.

"Because it is incompatible with the complete justice of Ammon," finished off Bāt.

"Yes, the complete justice of Ammon," repeated Tarībīt. "It would be a waste of time."

"Gentlemen, you don't have the power to turn down this request," said Kāy-Nan.

Siminkh leant towards the other priests. Their shaven heads drew close together like three melons stuck together.

"Honourable gentlemen," whispered Siminkh. "That is recorded in the third column of the fifty-first papyrus on the rules for priests' trials: 'If a priest submits a petition, even after he has been sentenced, that he be weighed according to the feather of the goddess Maat, then his request should be granted within three days unless the gods' lightning destroy him, whichever happens first.'"

Tarībīt whispered angrily:- "What is to be done then? Shall we let this accursed man get away?"

Siminkh also whispered slowly "So are you sure, honourable priest, that the scales will balance?"

"Ammon forbid," said Bāt.

(8)

At night in Ammon's land the temples were dark gloomy blocks, untouched by the light of the moon. The golden obelisks that stood scattered between the dark buildings were all that shone, like beseeching arms reaching towards the sky. They guided the high priest as he walked by night. Siminkh-Ammon crossed through the narcissus beds, whose fragrance spread in front of the huge temple which Ammonhetep, the father of Akhnaton had built. After the civil strife had died down and the temples had been re-opened, the high priest had ordered that flowers be grown in front of all the gods' temples, so Ammon's land became an extensive garden filled with the sweet-smelling scent of narcissi, jasmin and lotus.

After passing Ammonhetep's temple, Siminkh turned right towards the big palace built by Thutmosis III. There he saw the guard standing beneath one of the torches. When the guard recognised Siminkh-Ammon he knelt down in front of him on one knee, clutching his spear. The high priest held out his hand and gave him a special blessing on his head.

Kāy-Nan sat on the floor in the prison cell situated within the walls of the palace. His hands and feet were bound with ropes made from tightly twisted palm fibre. The torch-light

which suddenly lit up his dark prison cell streamed across his eyes and he hid his face. When he was able to open his eyes he found Siminkh-Ammon in front of him. He was standing alone in the cramped prison cell, having fixed the torch onto the wall.

The high priest remained standing in the cramped prison cell, not knowing how to begin. Finally he cleared his throat and said in a friendly tone:- "How are you Kāy?" The prisoner gave a short laugh and Siminkh realized his mistake immediately. Embarrassed, he said:- "I'm sorry Kāy ... I meant ..."

Finally he took matters in hand and leant over the priest who was lying a heap on the ground. He began, with difficulty, to untie the ropes which tied his hands and feet together. It took up a lot of time. The knots were tight and coarse. When he finished he began to rub his fingers which had been painfully scratched as the ropes cut into them. He stood up, panting.

Kāy-Nan also rubbed his wrists and feet, moaning as he did so. Finally he said:- "Thank-you Siminkh, but the guard will tie the ropes on again after you've left." The high priest mumbled with embarrassment:- "It wasn't me who ordered that you be bound with ropes, nor ... with anything else, those were the regent Pharoah's orders."

Kāy-Nan, as if remembering something, said:- "The divine father Ayy. He was at priests' institute with us. He was very humble. He used to call me, "My professor", along with everyone else." Siminkh, however, refused to remember or even to comment on it. Nevertheless, he'd found a good opportunity to say:- "In any case all that depends on you now."

Kāy-Nan looked up at the high priest and said:- "How?"

"Are you still determined to be weighed according to the goddess Maat's feather?" said Siminkh-Ammon.

When Kāy-Nan nodded his head in confirmation, Siminkh Ammon asked him:- "What if the scales don't balance my friend?"

The priest sat silently squatting on the floor. Then he said:- "Do you remember Siminkh, when we were at the priests' institute together?"

Siminkh smiled and said:- "Yes. The young priests used to mock me because I have a squint and they would mock you because you were always reading. You never walked without an open papyrus scroll in your hand."

"Yes," said Kāy-Nan. "You also used to read a lot but you were more intelligent. I still remember that discussion we once had together. I asked you why Oseris needed our sacrifices on earth, since he is lord of the resurrection, ruler over all good things in the after world, lord of justice and lord of Maat in the western provinces? If what is weighed is the heart, then what is the importance of what the hand offers? How can we treat the great Oseris as if he were one of Pharoah's low-ranking employees whose favour and good will we gain with presents? You told me:- "If you look into the wisdom of the lords, Kāy, you'll turn away from the straight path. We're on earth to obey and not to ask questions. "Do you remember that?"

Siminkh shook his head and said:- "Perhaps. Nevertheless I used to read everything you wrote about Aton. Don't think I didn't understand you. I always loved you Kāy, and I loved that poetry you write. However, when you wrote what you did about Aton, you resembled the ancient patriarchs in the the city of On. I still remember your statement:- "As the flower leans towards the sun, the heart leans towards Aton and responds to the light of love. Just as Aton removes the darkness of the night, so your heart will never know the darkness of fear or injustice. Everything I believed in has been shaken, Kāy, I even almost doubt Ammon himself."

Kāy-Nan smiled bitterly and said to his friend:- "Why didn't you believe?"

Siminkh moved agitatedly around the cramped cell in which there was no space. He ended up practically turning round and round himself as he talked. Perhaps he'd heard the question which Kāy-Nan had put to him, or perhaps he hadn't. Nevertheless, still agitated he said:-

"There's one thing about Aton, my friend Kāy, that you didn't mention in your reports. It's something I confirmed later when I saw all those who were Aton fanatics reciting prayers in his praise and hailing Akhn like madmen in every procession. Then, when Akhn fell they rushed to Ammon and Ra once again, participating in pouring forth curses on Akhn, the one whom they'd been worshipping with Aton the day before."

"Are you talking about hypocrisy?" said Kāy-Nan. "That's present in every era."

Siminkh shook his head and said:- "No, that's not what I mean. Rather, I'm talking about fear. Aton, according to what you wrote about him, is all-justice and all-goodness; but where

is fear, Kāy? Why did the people leave the pleasant, gentle Aton and return to our dreaded gods, to Ammon and Horus and Oseris?"

"Isn't that because you forced them to go back to them?" said Kāy-Nan. "Or do you think they prefer fear?"

"Not again, Kāy," said Siminkh. "I mean, they need fear. Aton was good for you and for Akhn and for the poets, but the masses don't live piously. The masses need fear in order to know piety."

"Who made them that way, Siminkh?" said Kāy-Nan.

The high priest looked questioningly at Kāy-Nan. "Who made them that way?" said Kāy-Nan as he propped himself up against the wall so that he could stand on his feet. "Who taught them to fear those gods who crave blood and sacrifices and man's torture beneath the sun and in the darkness of the grave?"

Siminkh shook his head and said doubtfully:- "You mean us priests? Are you quite sure that it wasn't the people who made us? ... Are you sure that we aren't the product of their need for us?"

"I'm sure Siminkh", said Kāy-Nan, "that my god, who spreads the light, unites all people to himself in rays of light. I am sure that he doesn't want them to draw close to him through bloodshed or through cutting men's necks or torturing them in the ground. You exempted Akhnaton from death and detained him in his palace because he is a Pharoah and because every Pharoah has to remain as a god, whatever he's done. But you torture Aton's priests publically. You tear off their limbs and kill them in front of the people, offering them as sacrifices to your gods. Siminkh, is that all the splendour of those gods? ... That they see blood, severed limbs and murder? Why, knowledgeable priest?"

"To bring back order," said the high priest. "To pacify the people."

Kāy-Nan shook his head to the left and to the right and said:-

"No, Siminkh. Rather for fear to be established. When fear comes back and settles in people's hearts then you'll rake in more money, build more temples and exploit more people. What's the point of their remaining poor? What's the point of them spending their lives in

holes made of mud that never see light or joy from the time they're born to the time they die, whilst you build temples for them in every corner with a god on the entrance that has the face of a crocodile and the body of a monkey, or the head of a snake and limbs of a lion? ... Whilst you tell them to fear at every step. Fear on earth and fear in the grave and fear at the resurrection. Don't raise your heads and don't ask questions ... Here we are, in our castles, weaving a cloak which will blanket you together in fear, from the sea to the land of Nubia, and all for your sakes ... But we've also, for your sakes, made holes in that cloak which only we know about. He who takes us by the hand can pass through them and be saved ..."

"But a day will come, my friend Siminkh," he said leaning against the wall, "when the people will worship the god of light. The god who tells them 'Love! ... Be merciful! ... Rejoice! I created you for joy, so worship me with joy.'"

Siminkh sighed and said:- "How beautiful that would be, Kāy, if it were true. How beautiful your dream would be, if it were true."

"With Aton it wasn't a dream. In the future he alone will be the truth." Kāy-Nan said.

"I'm afraid you'll wait a long time," said Siminkh.

"On the contrary," said Kāy-Nan, "I'll experience it right away, Siminkh, and so will you. Have you still not yet understood why I asked for Maat's feather?"

"It would be better for you to forget that, my friend," said Siminkh in a voice that was almost sorrowful. "There will be a feather there and there will be scales there but it will never be Maat's feather, or her scales."

Kāy-Nan kept quiet for a while, then said:- "Why are you doing this to me Siminkh?"

The high priest exploded, saying:- "Who do you think I am. I'm not the one who gives commands. I told you that's what the regent wants. They'll never allow you to be innocent, even if Maat herself comes down and declares you innocent. Don't you understand?"

"So there's nothing left except execution," said Kāy-Nan calmly.

"Or another solution, my friend," said Siminkh somewhat hesitantly. "You know very well what it is. Announce your repentance and go back to being Ammon's priest. Who knows? Perhaps you'll be the one to succeed me. The regent knows your worth."

"On the contrary, execution." said Kāy-Nan.

Siminkh sighed and said regretfully, "that was what I'd expected."

Silence prevailed. The high priest remained standing but Kāy slipped down his cell wall as he supported himself against it, until he was seated. "Thanks for coming, Siminkh," he said in a faint voice. "I appreciate what you've done."

However, the high priest said almost angrily:- "Get up!"

"I can't," said Kāy-Nan. "I'm very tired."

Nevertheless Siminkh continued to say:- "Get up!" in an angry voice. Then he bent over and took hold of the priest who was sitting on the floor and, almost dragging him, said:- "Get up and go outside."

"How?" said Kāy-Nan, as he responded to the strong grip.

Siminkh spoke quickly. He was almost panting:- "You know the road from here. You know these temples well. When you leave here, head for Thutmose III's temple, then for Hatshepsut's temple, then towards the big palace. Pass through it to the back door."

"What about the guards?" said Kāy-Nan in surprise.

At that point the high priest left Kāy-Nan behind and laughed for the first time since he'd entered. "Have you forgotten who I am Kāy? ..." he said. "A short while ago you said that I was more intelligent than you at the priests' institute. Thank you, but I don't think that's so. I couldn't write a quarter of the reports you've written, or one of your poems ..." Then he finished in an almost child-like tone:- "However Kāy, I was better than you and all the other students in the school at one particular subject. Do you remember what it was?"

Kāy-Nan suddenly shouted:- "Magic!"

"Rather, divine power," said Siminkh in an excessively serious tone.

Then he opened the cell door. Outside the guard was visible, stretched out across the ground on his side. He snored in his sleep, clasping his spear in his arms. The high priest had nevertheless needed just a little divine power to attain that result.

Kāy-Nan, however, went back into the cell again and locked the door.

"What are you doing?" said Siminkh in surprise.

"Thank-you once again, my friend," said Kāy-Nan "but I don't want to expose you or that guard to danger ... How will you justify my escape?"

"But you didn't escape," said Siminkh in a serious tone. "Ammon's lightning destroyed you and you disappeared. That, as you know, is the most severe punishment which can happen to a person ..." Then he reached his hand out and opened the cell door.

Kāy-Nan hesitated a little, then said:- "But why are you doing this for me?"

The high priest frowned and said:- "I don't do things. Ammon is the one who does things. He gives me orders and I carry them out."

Kāy-Nan remained standing, looking around the cell. Siminkh said calmly:- "Leave Kāy! I know what's going around in your head now. Now you want to stay and sacrifice your life for the sake of Aton."

"For truth's sake," said Kāy-Nan. "What's the value of living a life of lies?"

"How easy it would be for you to die for the sake of your truth," said Siminkh. "But do you know how to sacrifice for its sake Kāy-Nan? ... Write poetry."

Kāy-Nan smiled sadly and said:- "Those who will read it are very few, Siminkh."

"Yes" said Siminkh. "That's true. But who knows, perhaps Kāy, those few are the ones who will make your dream come true."

"Who knows?" repeated Kāy-Nan in a faint voice. He remained quiet for a while, then stretched out his hand and took hold of his friend's arm, saying:- "So, farewell to you Siminkh and farewell to Ammon who, along with you, once changed into Aton."

The high priest stayed standing outside the door, watching after Kāy-Nan until he disappeared. Then he went back, took the torch from inside the cell, and put it back in its place in the wall above the sleeping guard.

Once again he walked through the blocks of dark temples and silence. He bent down over a flower bed and picked a narcissus flower, putting it close to his nose. When he approached the holy lake he saw the white geese sleeping peacefully beside it, surrounding

its dark shore with a white circle. He saw the moon scattering silver specks over the still, black lake. Now he was passing in front of the temple of Thutmosis III. Before him was the formidable statue of Ammon wearing his tall crown with its double feather on top of his head. He stood for a long time, contemplating the stone face in the light of the moon. At last he muttered:-

"Yes, Ammon, why did you make me high priest?"

Then he stood on tiptoe for a moment and put the narcissus flower on the huge cold knee before turning his back and walking away.

REFERENCES TO THE TRIAL OF KĀY-NAN

1. Akhnaton : The name adopted by Amenophis V (1372-1354 BC), son of Amenophis III and husband of Nefertiti. For 17 years he ruled Egypt and innovated a new religion based on the unity of god.
2. Aton : The name given to one of the pharonic gods; the 'god of the sun'. Aton was given special honours by Akhnaton.
3. Ra : The pharonic god who was believed to have created the world and everything in it.
4. Ammon : The pharonic god who held an unrivalled position of authority in pharonic history. His name means 'concealment'.
5. Ammonhetep : Son of Hapu, Amenophis III's architect. Later he became a god of healing.
6. Thebes: replaced Memphis as the pharonic capital city. Ammon had his throne there. Kings built their palaces and were buried there.
7. The Arabic word used for "great" is "Ha'il", chosen particularly because of its similarity to the expression "*Hail* Hitler".
8. This phrase corresponds to a famous line in Arabic poetry.
9. Hathur : god of the lower world or under hemisphere.
10. Thutmose III : Son of Thutmose II and father of Amenophis II (1504-1450 BC). Great conqueror and builder of temples.
11. Hatshepsut : 18th Dynasty king, in fact a woman (1504-1483 BC.).
12. Maat : great goddess, worshipped especially at Thebes in connection with Ammon. She wore an ostrich plume on her head which was the weight of truth placed in the balance for weighing the heart of a dead person at judgement.
13. Oseris : The god of all goodness.

A HILL-TOP DISCUSSION

Gradually I became affiliated with a small gathering that came together in Bāb al-Lūq square¹ around four o'clock in the afternoon. We would meet every day - five or six faces that had grown accustomed to one another - in front of that small shop which sold cigarettes. At first I would do certain things for no reason at all. I would rush forward at great speed and ask the old vendor for a packet of cigarettes. After taking it and turning my back, I would raise my hands suddenly and stop, or I would hit my forehead with my hand, pretending that I'd remembered something. Then I would return to the vendor and ask him about the check-list. After a while I stopped doing those things. I began to go punctually and stand, calmly waiting for my turn to look at the results. I would wait like the rest to one day find the numbers which I wanted. However, that never happened to me nor to any one of them.

Perhaps my embarrassment in the beginning stemmed from my being the youngest and best educated of those affiliated to the group. As the days went by it ceased. The fat, old lady was there first. However early I went, she would always be there before me, showing a special concern for the blue piece of paper which had the picture of the dove on it. She invariably wore a black flowing garment and a black scarf, tied round her neck, with a knot in it that hung down over her right shoulder. I never knew if it was a sign of mourning or to protect her neck or for some other reason. Sometimes she would turn her face the other way and not talk to me. At other times she would say that she could see a good omen in my face, and would come up to me beaming with joy. She'd take out a rolled up handkerchief from her chest that had been white but had turned grey; then she'd take the folded lottery tickets out of it and ask me to check them. Her tickets were like ours: a red one with the head of Athena on it, crowned with a helmet; a green one with the picture of a nurse wearing a white cap on her head; and another one with nothing on it but arabic numbers in one column and foreign numbers in another column opposite. Underneath were paragraphs about the lottery rules and regulations.

As for the blue tickets which had the picture of the dove at the top, they were issued by a charitable organisation in Alexandria, and it was from this organisation that the woman was expecting to get something. After I'd checked all the tickets and then returned them silently to her, she would ask me anxiously to check the dove ticket once more. I would do it. The woman wasn't impatient or greedy but she simply wanted to make sure. She would ask me if there was a big difference between her number and the top, prize-winning ticket. Very often there was only a small difference and that would please her. She'd look at me triumphantly and say:- "Didn't I tell you so?"

Sometimes she would tell me about her life. She'd wasted her lifetime away working in the home of one of the Beys² from the days of eminent people. He was a tyrant in his youth. He would bellow and roar when the house was full of servants. If he found a speck of dust on a chair he had mercy on no one. Now it had come to an end. There was no longer anyone in the spacious house apart from him and her. She had to clean seven rooms, buy the food, cook and feed him with her own hand since he was paralysed. She wished he would die, not because she was a barbarian or because she'd forgotten that her stomach had been filled by his providence, but so that God would have mercy on him. For what was left of the person if she had to carry him to 'do his deed' then clean his body afterwards? She prayed to God that she herself would die before such a thing should happen to her.

Amongst the others in our group, there was also a waiter from a nearby restaurant. He was always in a hurry with his white caftan³ and wide green belt round his waist. He would say to the vendor as he brandished his tickets and laughed:-

"Finish up and let us go! I want several thousand pounds immediately. I have to go back to the customers quickly."

After the vendor had finished serving the waiter, he would give us some advice. Sometimes he won a pound or two - one of those small prizes-and he would rejoice greatly over it. He said that the credit for that went back to the advice of his Indian customer who taught him to buy all his tickets with consecutive numbers and to buy them at the same time every day. In this way his stars' cycle had to run into the cycle of good fortune. He used to urge us to watch the stars like him for the luck which revolved in order to catch its star one day so everything would change. Who knew? Perhaps one of us would have the good fortune to win first prize in that way one day soon.

Every day he would confirm this enthusiastically as he put his new tickets in his caftan pocket and walked off, chuckling in the same way as he came.

The rest of the group were quiet and didn't draw any attention. There was a *ta'miya*⁴ seller who wandered around carrying a hollow container on his back with hot *ta'miya* inside. He would go around the *Bāb al-Lūq* coffee houses in search of his livelihood. Then there was the Nubian *bawwāb*⁵ from a nearby building and a vendor who sold fruit on a hand-cart from the nearby market. These were all like me: they lost and bought in silence.

That day I didn't meet any of them. I didn't go on time. That day I went to the coffee house late and when I got there the waiter told me that 'Amm 'Abbās⁶ had asked after me.

I had intended to go downstairs at the proper time like every day, despite the fact it was a cold winter's day. I returned from work shortly after noon and ate lunch in my room on the roof. It consisted of a piece of fried fish which I'd bought from the market. However, after lunch I stayed put, looking through the glass window.

Clusters of big black clouds joined and parted, leaving small blue gaps in the sky like cave entrances. Sometimes a small yellow sun would pop out through these gaps and spread pale yellow light on the house rooves in the alleys of 'Abdīn.⁷ Washing hung out there and dark-coloured bed-covers were spread out over the walls and the window ledges. The cats were there too, curled up in the sunny patches, along with the dogs who had buried their heads between their stretched-out legs. The children had lifted up their galabeyas⁸ and were riding stick-horses on the roof-tops. I waited a long time for my neighbour, who had a liking for pigeons, to go up onto the neighbouring roof and set his colourful flock free. I looked forward to the moment when the flock soared into the vast open space around us and attracted other colourful flocks. They would rally together and join up, ascending to great heights until they became one flock circling around and adorning the sky with its beauty.

However, that day my neighbour was late so I got up, took off my suit and went to sleep.

I didn't get to the coffee house until long after sunset.

The cigarette and lottery shop was closed. I headed towards the coffee house which occupied a small corner in a side entrance to one of the residential buildings. Most of the seats were arranged in the passageway in circles around circular copper tables of the type with thin stands. Fortunately I found an empty table and sat down at it. Across the passageway from me sat a fat man wearing a white galabeya; he was resting his elbows on the copper table and had folded one of his legs, putting his foot underneath his thigh. He was absorbed in sucking at the mouthpiece of a water-pipe whilst he stared at the ground. When the waiter told me that 'Amm 'Abbās had asked after me and that he was eager to see me, I told the waiter to call him. He said that 'Amm 'Abbās was passing by the nearby coffee houses and that he would come back in a little while.

I ordered a glass of tea. I felt as if I would never be able to stay long in this cold. It settled in the passageway like an invisible cloud, sticking to my thighs. When my tea arrived I held the hot glass

in both palms. A certain stranger came up and asked permission to sit next to me. He remained standing.

He was tall and had an oval-shaped face. His hair was soft and grey, but he had a broad chest and shoulders. He wore a dark-grey suit. I told him that the seat was free and that he was welcome to take it. At that moment I imagined that the fat man smoking the water-pipe took the mouthpiece from his mouth and moved it to the left and to the right as he looked at me. However, when I looked at him to make sure, the mouthpiece was in his mouth and he was staring at the ground as usual. I took no notice and begun to sip my tea, but at that moment I saw 'Amm 'Abbās in the entrance, carrying a shoe-cleaning box. When I signalled to him he came over to me jubilantly, but after a couple of steps he stopped, turned round and got involved in a conversation with the fruit seller who was standing in the entrance to the passageway. When I saw them leaving together and about to disappear from the entrance I called out:- "‘Amm ‘Abbās!" He didn't hear me.

My grey-haired neighbour across the round table was likewise staring at the entrance to the passageway and smiling. Then he turned to me and said:-

"He'll be right back." I shook my head and went back to drinking my tea, but my neighbour continued to stare at me with the same wide-mouthed smile.

"Have you known 'Amm 'Abbās for long?" he asked me.

"He cleans my shoes almost every day."

"Don't you know his life story?"

"No," I said indifferently, "but sometimes I hear him saying, 'What a pity about you girl, what a pity, Hānim!'" Sometimes the entire coffee shop hears him say that. I think he had a daughter called Hānim who died."

My neighbour laughed and I noticed that his face was covered with more wrinkles than I had thought.

"No, no," he said. "The girl Hānim had her own special story. As for simple 'Amm 'Abbās, he's a dark horse!"

I looked away from him and went back to drinking the last mouthfuls of my cup of tea, whilst I thought about getting up and catching up with 'Amm 'Abbās to find out what he wanted me for. I

was afraid that he'd resume his rounds around the coffee shops and would be late back. I was feeling cold and irritated by the insistence of the man who was sitting next to me on talking. Nevertheless he carried on:- "That was a long time ago," he said. "Amm 'Abbās was different and so was Cairo. Did you know that this square which we're sitting in used to be called "al-Azhār Square?"

I told him:-

"Yes, I had heard that."

"You heard about it, but most probably you didn't see it" He said. "This square was actually a little flower garden, neatly arranged in round beds in the centre of a tidy green lawn. Short bushes surrounded the flowers and grew in the midst of them, sometimes climbing up iron-work. All this was encompassed by a short iron fence that was ornamentally moulded into the shape of fine interlocking triangles that looked like lace. There were trees everywhere, in the square and in the streets which branched off from it. On the pavements tall trees stretched out their green branches until they met across the middle and intertwined so that the whole street became a shady vineyard. In the summer the trees blossomed with big purple and red flowers; then in the autumn they would shake them off onto the ground and one could walk on a soft carpet of flowers. Every day a truck would pass by to water the trees, one by one, so that they would always look fresh, clean and green, not like today's sick trees that are hidden beneath the dust so that one couldn't tell whether they are trees or lamp-posts when passing by. They would water the trees in the afternoon and before sunset a man carrying a step-ladder on his shoulder would pass by. He would climb the steps and clean the street lanterns, both inside and outside, until their glass shone. Then he would light the gas lamps and the street would be bathed in a soft light that mingled with the shadow of the trees. That would happen every day."

"Here in Bāb al-Lūq?" I said.

"Yes," he said, "I mean, a long time ago." Then he laughed as he said:-

"In the days when there were woodpeckers. Are you familiar with the woodpecker? That little bird with a plumed crown on its head? It would also build its nest in those trees next to the dove who cooed so beautifully and the carrier pigeon with its multi-coloured, shiny neck. You used to wake up in the morning to those birds singing and when you went out to work you would see their golden flocks also going to work in the fields. In the evening you would see them returning to their green

leafy homes. Along the Nile corniche tall camphor trees spread their perfumed fragrance abroad. There were also Arabian jasmine and jasmine trees there. Most of the houses were surrounded by short iron fences on which green foliage was trellised, brightened up with white jasmine. Everywhere one walked in the midst of perfumed air. There were many casinos along the Nile. I remember one of them. In the entrance there was clean yellow sand bordered with potted plants, Egyptian privet and camphor trees. At night clusters of coloured lamps lit up the entrance whilst inside the music played and the people danced. Young men were there too, guarding the casinos against the riff-raff, for the customers were princes, noblemen, foreigners and respectable people who all had their own car complete with a driver. Those clean white, red and yellow cars were lined up by the pavement, beneath the trees, shining like mirrors with jasmine-flower necklaces inside. ‘Amm ‘Abbās was a bouncer in that casino and Hānim was one of the show girls.”

“‘Amm ‘Abbās!” I shouted. “But he’s as thin as a rake!”

“That’s now”, said the grey-haired man. “You didn’t see him in those days. All the young men were frightened of him. He was also tall and broad like a camphor tree.”

The grey-haired man was silent and so was I. I looked at the man who was smoking the water-pipe in front of me. He took a long look into my eyes as if he were daydreaming, then went back to staring at the ground.

“I’m leaving,” I said.

“Me too”, said the grey-haired man. “We’re going the same way.”

“How do you know?”

“I know,” he said.

In the square underneath the footbridge the street hawkers were selling matches, combs, cigarette-lighter gas, condoms and cheap perfumes. They were huddled up from the cold in front of the low tables which were scattered all over the square and on which their goods were displayed. They had their hands in their galabeya pockets and some had their heads covered with kuffiyehs.¹⁰ Dust and scraps of paper covered the ground. A glittering yellow light diffused from the tall lamps. I walked slowly, stopping for a few moments to look at the goods which I didn’t want. I was hoping that the grey-haired man would leave me or that I’d find an opportunity to leave, but he continued to walk silently beside me.

At the steps to the bridge I held out my hand to shake hands with him and said:-

"I'm going this way."

"But you didn't wait for 'Amm 'Abbās," he said.

"I'll see him tomorrow," I said. "I'm feeling cold and I want to go home."

However, he stretched out his hand and grasped my arm as he smiled and said:- "Man, it's better to walk around the bridge rather than walk over it. Look, do you see anyone using it? It's just to make the city look beautiful. I'll show you a short cut and we'll meet 'Amm 'Abbās on the way." Then he laughed as he said:- "and perhaps the Hānim girl too!"

As we were walking along the street, which was less crowded due to the cold, he said:-

"You'd never recognise that this girl was Hānim if you saw her now. You'll never know what she was like. The Hānim whom 'Abbās talks about was ... how shall I say? She was the most beautiful creature in all the Nile casinos. She was tall with bronze-coloured skin and her black hair was soft and thick, shining like the Nile at night. Everything about her was beautiful: her long neck; her soft, protruding breasts; her taut stomach; her wide, black eyes with their thick eye-lashes; her long, tender-skinned thighs; everything. They used to dance in the European way in that casino, on a wooden stage with the Nile behind. It was only in the winter that they would erect glass screens, but through these also the Nile and the white sails of the boats floating on it could be seen.

In those days Hānim was called Nānā. There were other girls there besides her of course, both Europeans and Egyptians. There were beautiful women who would come with the customers and the show-girls who were employed in the business. However, it was Nānā who would dance. You wouldn't have eyes for anyone but her amidst the crowds of dancers on the stage. She was the only one who would stay there the whole time, beginning with the band when the music started and coming down only when it stopped. The foreigners and the princes would take turns with her and she would dance there with them as if she was unaware of their presence.

People came to join her; men swore they'd wear her out; dancers promised to keep up with her and go on longer than her. It was no use. After an hour or two the rivals retreated and she remained, tapping the ground lightly, pounding it violently... Her feet would dance with the floor and she would raise her head to the sky above her long neck and above all the dancers heads so one could scarcely

see them. All you could see was her short yellow dress flying around her sleek thighs, turning around them again and again, whilst all the eyes turned with her.

Some of the foreigners would come every night just to watch her; some of them suggested that she travel to Europe, saying:- "We're never seen anyone dance like this. If you travel you'll earn a fortune." But she stayed. After the dance it was her who chose who would open the bottle for her and she would ask what price she wanted for the champagne. It was said that important tradesmen went broke because of her. That was what was said, but I don't know if it was true or not. Nevertheless, when she sat down with whoever she chose, everyone envied him. He would feel, along with everyone else, that she was doing him a favour rather than taking something from him.

However, my friend, none of all this was important. What was really important was that one saw Hānim, or Nānā, later on, after she'd had a drink and when she belly-danced. There was no band accompanying her, simply one drummer and a lutist. They would begin long after midnight, when the European band had left and everyone was sitting, drinking and laughing. After a time the laughter would subside and cease altogether, then silence would prevail. A long silence. Perhaps there would be a drumbeat or two, or someone would strum at the lute strings. The whisper of the waves might be heard, or their swift gurgling in the days of the flood; or maybe a shout. Do you think she would change her clothes? ... That she'd wear a dancing outfit for example? Never. She would always sit there in a full-skirted, sleeveless dress which was mostly yellow in colour. She would drink in silence like the rest. The silence at night was like a tent over the casino. Drunks' heads hung mournfully. Then without anyone noticing, at a moment which only they knew, the drumbeats would roll and the strumming on the lute would quicken.

You could see Hānim in her place. She'd leave her goblet aside and, hammering the floor with her feet, her body would shake. Her head would move from side to side, rocking as if she were trying to resist something, or as if she were rejecting a secret call, though the call didn't force anything. You would see her stretching out both arms as she sat in her seat. Her hands would pull out the pegs to that dark, gloomy tent which had descended over the casino, so that it would fly far away; and she'd get up. She would head towards that stage which was empty apart from the drummer and the lutist. Then Hānim would join them, her body towering high in her short yellow dress. Nobody clapped there; but when she began, slowly and softly, you could almost hear people's breathing as if they were sighing deeply ... She would stretch out her arms like two beams of light around her body whilst the

night and the Nile were behind her ... Those graceful arms moved like two soft branches transformed in the night breeze. Her fingers would dance ... They made music on invisible strings from which a concertina of melody would slowly and softly surround the spectators ... her body rippled ... her feet touched the floor delicately as she glided across the stage ..., a fine silk handkerchief that the breeze would carry over there to where the stars were ... At that time you could scarcely hear the drum; only a fine string vibrated intermittently, also in time with her body. Then the drum started ... also faintly ... also intermittently ... a new type of movement would pervade those long thighs ... those arms that were raised up high ... those aroused breasts ... that supple, verdant backside ... she was a sea-wave coming from afar, bubbling with foam, or a sexy white filly tearing its reins and prancing on its thighs.

Suddenly that storm would break out... the filly would run free ... the raging wave would hit the shore and be scattered across the sky ... Hānim would dance ... the whole world danced: the Nile beneath her, the stars in the sky above her, the drumbeats, the trees, the breeze, the spectator's hearts, heads and feet. Joy danced across the universe as she was there, twirling and dancing. She would bend over backwards and her two arms would dance like the wings of a white bird, sometimes flapping in a rampant wind and other times gliding in gentle breezes whilst the drum endeavored to follow that capricious melody... She would prostrate herself on the ground ... her soft black hair strewn about her head ... the braids dancing like noisy waves at night ... The filly would raise its dark head ... prancing and bolting as its bronze thighs kept in time with the dance ... Once again the melody would rise up from the floor to the heavens ... nothing would placate that filly as she ran, swayed, bent and bolted the midst of shouts of exclamation that broke forth from the spectators' hearts, crossing the Nile and the open air until they stayed hanging in space. Then, once again, she would tap the floor lightly. Everything would be quiet once more ... clear ... a soft veil quivering over the heads. This time the strings would play softly and melodiously, until everything started all over again; once, twice, a hundred times. How long did it continue? An hour? Two hours? Believe it or not, sometimes twilight would tinge the horizon and the Nile with its red colour whilst that whirlpool kept on turning. Hānim. Nānā. Oh what days those were!"

The grey-haired man was breathing heavily as he said all this.

He stopped and I asked him:- "And you? Do you still remember all that even to this day? You must have gone there a lot."

He was quiet for a long time. Then he took a deep breath of fresh air and, trying to make his voice sound calm, he said:- "Yes, of course. I was there every night. I used to love Hānim. She used to love 'Abbās."

I remember that we were walking along as he talked. I couldn't interrupt him, nor could I leave him. I remember that we had left 'Abdīn behind us and that we were walking along al-Azhār street. The smell of raw incense that penetrated through the closed perfume shops filled my nose as he spoke. Then the scented smell came to an end and he stopped talking. We began to walk along those dark winding back-streets. There, youths walked behind and in front of us along those intersecting alleyways, cursing and shouting at one another. I couldn't understand what kept them on the street in this cold weather, nor what had brought us to this place.

"Where are we going?" I asked the grey-haired man.

"Don't you smoke dope?" he said roughly.

"Rarely," I said. "Sometimes."

"Let this be one of those times," he said.

I remember how that night-time darkness in the alleys opened up suddenly onto a reasonably spacious and well-lit courtyard. A short queue of men wearing suits and galabeyas stood in it, in front of the entrance to a house that was blocked by a wide table on which some small scales stood. A man stood behind the table, his head wrapped in a big white scarf made of silk that descended to his ears and his neck and hung down on his shoulders. He was weighing certain things. In another corner of the courtyard an old woman wearing black was sitting with a basket made of palm fronds in front of her. Honey-sticks and doum-palm fruits were lined up on the basket beside packets of chewing-gum and imported chocolate and some youths and night flies hovered over the top.

The grey-haired man went over and stood at the end of the queue.

I also remember that afterwards we sat on one of the hills. It was made up of a few rocks and a lot of soft dust. After he'd made his purchase we continued walking through those narrow winding back streets until we came to a desolate place with the face of the hills in front of us, towering into the darkness like a black wall. However, there was a pathway there which passed through those heights which seemed to me to be like one massive hill. He went along it before me with well-trained footsteps, until we reached a peak that was almost like a cavity in the rocks.

When we stopped, I was panting as I asked him:- "Where are we going to?"

"Here," he said.

"Here?" I said. "In this desolate place? I thought you knew a good hashish den in the hills."

"In a little while," he said, "you'll discover that this is the best hashish den."

I looked around me. Beside us there was a garden whose trees had died a long time ago. A few of the trees were still upright and bare. Some of them were leaning over, propped up against the rest, but most of them had fallen onto the ground. The citadel was to our right, lit up by yellow floodlights; beneath us lay Ṣalāh Ṣālim street where the lights of fast moving cars flashed before they disappeared. Across the street the Muqāṭṭam hills loomed with the tombstones of the poor and the domed tombs of the rich beneath them. On the highest hill there was a thin, dark-coloured minaret that looked like a spear fixed into the ground.

I put my hands under my armpits and huddled up, saying to the grey-haired man:-

"I don't think I can. I'm cold."

At the time he was sitting, engrossed in emptying cigarette tobacco onto a folded piece of paper which he had taken out of his pocket. He clasped it between his arms and his body so that the tobacco wouldn't blow away.

"Aren't you embarrassed," he told me, "when you're such a tall, broad young man?"

"Nevertheless, I feel cold so let's go back, please. I wanted you to tell me the rest of Hānim's story but I've abandoned that idea. Not in this cold."

He folded the paper well on all sides and put it in his pocket, then he got up sighing to himself and headed towards the nearest tree that was stretched out across the ground. I heard the sound of dead branches being broken.

After that we sat with a small fire between us that I'd lit for us to warm our cold hands on. We took turns with the precious cigarette, taking care that no ashes fell from it.

"You didn't tell me your name," I said to him.

He laughed and said:- "Whatever you like: Ḥasan, Ḥasanayn, Amīn, Ḥannā, Ḥānin, they're all names. Call me whatever you want."

"I'll call you Hānim's lover."

"I've no objection. That's appropriate too. But Hānim had many lovers so you have to give me a number too. Number 37, or 167, as you like." He started to laugh. Then he said:-

"But you have to keep number 1 for the most faithful of her lovers. You'll never believe who it was. He was tall and fat with a stocky neck and a booming voice. He used to come from the start of the evening to watch her as she danced European dances, but he didn't dance with her. It was difficult for him to even move his obese body, so how could he dance? However from time to time he would utter one particular phrase in a deep voice:- "Oh my God, woman!" Every evening he would reserve a table, the first one directly below the stage. When she danced she would see him craning his neck and raising his enormous head, captivated as he stared at her. If you'd put a knife to his neck at that time he never would have felt you."

"But what's strange about that?" I asked. "Didn't you say that she bewitched everyone, including you?"

"The strange thing, my friend", he said, "was that Medḥat (that was his name), Medḥat, who was infatuated by her to that extent, was ... it was rumoured that he would have nothing to do with women. Yes. He didn't get married and we never heard that he'd been in love, except for his strange love for Hānim of course, to whom he remained faithful until the end. Hānim had a liking for him too. She would stroke his shoulder when she passed by him, stopping beside him to say a word or two. On many nights she would drink with him and then she would see him wide-eyed, shaking, his body and hands trembling. Even ʿAbbās didn't love Hānim with such great love."

"But you didn't finish the story," I said. "What happened to Hānim? What happened to you and to ʿAbbās?"

"We're all fine and wish you well."

"Please! I want to know."

"What do you want to know? But I'll tell you: things happened, Nānā got addicted to sniffing cocaine and Hānim came back. It happened to many like her in those days. She would stand there on the stage, the drum beating and lute playing whilst she held out her hand silently as if she were begging for help. She'd move her legs to dance and it would seem like she was learning to walk. After

a short time they threw her out of the casino. 'Abbās stabbed Hānim with a knife and almost killed her. He went to prison for it. That's what happened."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all."

"How come? What happened to you when..."

"Be quiet!" he said, as if he were screaming.

So I was quiet ... The fire had died down. I saw the big, red coals shooting sparks into the darkness that sounded like bullets. Hence I took a step backwards. He took a step back too, leaning his body back and supporting himself on the ground with his elbows as he said:-

"Hānim, Hānim, who was Hānim really? The real Hānim could be seen later during the day, after she'd left the casino at dawn, arm in arm with 'Abbās. As she walked along the street beside him her tall, thin body could be seen. The nobles and the Pashas¹¹ would stay behind in rows of shiny cars, lingering in front of the casino just to catch a glimpse of her as she left. They were all prepared to pay whatever she wanted to accompany them, but she would walk with 'Abbās. Where would she go? She'd go to a room in the district of Bayn al-Sarāyāt. In those days that whole area next to the university was all fields, in the middle of which impoverished homes, like shacks, were scattered. An hour or two after she'd left the casino, surrounded by a halo of wonder and enchantment, you could see her there, wearing a long galabeya and a scarf tied round her head like the peasant girls. She would stand amongst the rest of the women from the area, holding a dish in order to buy fūl¹² from the fūl cart. Otherwise you could see her later on, squatting in front of the open door to her little room, preparing vegetables and lighting the gas burner to cook for her husband 'Abbās. When she wiped her face, perhaps you would notice streaks of dirt across that face which shone like the moon at night. At that time you might pass by without noticing her or stopping beside her for a moment. She was just one of the poor women in that poor area. This was the real Hānim: a wretch; a nobody like all the others. A blessing had befallen her which she didn't deserve, then it passed by like a cloud. Tell me who Hānim is? Tomorrow she'll die and no one will hear about it. No one will walk in the funeral procession; they'll bury her in the charity-endowed graveyard, down there with the others like her."

"But why did you love her then?" I said.

"I wanted her", he said, "that was all. I thought that I'd raised that fleeting blessing above those wretches, but ..." Then he sat up straight and said:-

"But you'll never understand. I told you I loved her to help you to understand. However, the love which I know isn't the kind the riff-raff intended. It's another kind that focuses on a woman. A woman that I know one day I'll ... But don't bother because you'll never understand. Yes, I was there every night. I would sit and watch her wrapping her arms alternately round her waist ... I saw her buxom breasts hold fast to other chests ... I watched her when she sat down .. when she turned her head round and a tiny muscle appeared behind her ear, stretching so that it made a small hollow where her neck joined her shoulders. I wished I could fill that hollow with my lips ... I watched her when she ran her fingertips over her goblet and I would imagine that tender, soft touch ... I observed a new roundness over her firm, rosebud lips as she drank... a slackness over her thick eyebrows and a pursing of the lips when she was thinking. Yes, nothing about her escaped my notice. Every night I would sit there and watch her. Did 'Abbās know her like I did? Did he see what I saw of her? Did he really deserve her?"

"She loved him and he loved her. That's enough."

"It may be enough for you, but not for me."

"Did you torture yourself in that way every night, waiting like the others until you saw her going off with 'Abbās? Why? Why, so long as you knew that she wasn't for you?"

"What do you mean?" he said. "Why should I go? Didn't I tell you a thousand times? I owned the casino. It was mine. I owned all the girls in the casino, but when I asked for her she said:- "Westerner, would you accept being 'Abbās' partner?" "I accept," I said. "I'll accept everything you want." She said:- "I won't accept a partnership, neither will 'Abbās."

"Are you a Westerner?" I said.

"Of course not, but that's another story. Hānim rejected me, but my revenge was appropriate for her."

"So you were the one who taught her to take cocaine?" I said.

"What cocaine?"

"Didn't you just say just moment ago that she got addicted to sniffing cocaine and could no longer dance, so they threw her out of the casino? I mean, you threw her out of the casino ..."

"Did you believe that? you wanted an entertaining story so I told you one: the story of the belly dancer who begs in the streets and sniffed cocaine. No, my dear friend, my revenge was simpler than that and much more beautiful."

He said that, stood up and began to stretch.

"You've reminded me of things that I'd almost forgotten, but we need a bigger fire ..." he said.

He walked in the direction of the dead garden. The floodlights which had lit up the citadel had been turned off. Its dome looked like a single dark hill in the darkness, or like a woman's breast rising up towards the sky which was adorned with many stars. Those stars were like small windows of fire far-away in the distance, around which winged heavenly beings reclined and chatted just like I was chatting with the grey-haired man. However, they didn't know about revenge or grief. Little clouds were floating around them in that dark heavenly sea like transparent white boats following one another.

When he returned he began to break the branches into small pieces amidst the embers. Then he bent over and began to blow on them until the ends of the branches lit and they started to crackle faintly. I sat huddled up, contemplating his face that was lit by the fire. The hair from his sprouting beard was all white, whereas his soft, silver coloured hair, combed to the back, still had some streaks of black in it. I guessed that he had been good-looking in his youth for his eyes, now surrounded by wrinkles, were wide, honey-coloured and shone like cat's eyes. When he started to light another cigarette, he told me quietly:-

"You've let me talk a long time so why don't you talk now?"

"What do you want me to talk about?"

"Whatever you like ... About love for example. Haven't you ever been in love?"

"Many times, and I've failed many times. Like you said, you owned the casino women, and I've been owned by many women, although I've not owned one. All of them were like Hānim with me. No matter how much I tried to get close, they were far away."

He handed me the cigarette and laughed as he said:- "Tell me about one of them! Perhaps I can give you some advice."

I pushed his hand back saying:- "No thank-you. I don't want to smoke. I've had enough. Maybe later on."

He didn't insist but took a deep breath, then said: "Are you afraid you'll lose consciousness? It doesn't matter. Tell me ..."

"But I told you they were all stories without success. They're all the same. If I also had a story a long time ago, I don't think that I'd share it with anyone. Yes, this darkness reminds me of her; so does this place. I was five years old at the time, or bigger, or maybe a little smaller."

"Five years old? You must have been in love with your nursemaid!"

"There were no nursemaids in our village. It was my mother who raised me. I used to love her, but I also loved my sister Maḥāsīn who was five years older than me. Perhaps I was more attached to her than my mother, for she also loved me a great deal. Everywhere she went she would drag me along by the hand. She would take me when she delivered food to my father in his field at noon, and on the way she would wait for the opportunity to go down into one of the fields and gather the broad beans for me which I so loved; whilst I stood outside to draw her attention and warn her if anyone appeared. Otherwise she would take me with her when they sent her to the store to buy something, and she'd take two or three eggs from the house with her so she could buy me honey-sticks.

When my mother sent her to the mill that was far away on the outskirts of the village, to grind some corn, my sister used to sing village songs to me along the way, carrying me if I got tired of walking, even though she was also small and skinny. I used to laugh when I saw the flour in the mill covering her face and her golden hair, sticking to the lashes of her green eyes so that she'd look like the conjuring clown who used to pass by us from time to time. However, this sight used to please my mother who always wanted to conceal Maḥāsīn's beauty, fearing someone would cast the evil eye on her¹³. She used to plait her beautiful blond hair and tie a scarf over her head, hiding the plaits inside her dress through the neck-opening. When she went out, my mother would choose an old torn galabeya for her to wear and would refrain from washing her face so that her clear skin wouldn't show.

Nevertheless none of this succeeded in concealing my sister's beauty, which was known and talked about by my whole village. When one of our neighbours got pregnant people wouldn't intercede for her to have a boy as was customary in our area; rather they'd ask God to endow the neighbour with a girl as beautiful as Maḥāsīn. Neither did my mother's precautions succeed in tricking death, for when Maḥāsīn was ten, death visited her in the form of a brief fever and took her away with him. That day, after they'd buried her, my mother sat and cried. The women around her cried and lamented, singing those sad songs and I retreated into a far away corner. I wasn't crying, rather I was waiting. I was waiting for the day to end. I'd remembered that when Maḥāsīn used to pass by the graveyard at sunset she'd run fearfully, pulling me behind her. She used to tell me that the dead come out of their graves after sunset and exchanged visits with one another. They would meet together and tell stories just like us live people.

That night I went. I wanted to see Maḥāsīn when she came out and tell her that I didn't want her to die and that I wanted her to come back with me. I was convinced that when I cried and hung onto her dress, she would never be able to refuse my request. I always used to do that with her when I wanted something and she would never deny me what I asked. Shortly before sunset I crept out of the house, crossed by the village houses and then began to run there, to that little hill where our village graves rested in a deserted place. We had a small dog who was very fond of my sister and when I'd left the houses behind me, I noticed that he was also following me, running along behind me. I was somewhat relieved by that, appreciating his company, so I joined up with him, seeking his protection as I ran along. When we got there, I took him in my arms and sat down next to her grave. There was a full moon in the sky and the graves could be seen clearly. I was trembling with fear. The dog in my lap was whining as all dogs do and I tried to make him be quiet, talking to him to still my fear. I sat and waited. However, Maḥāsīn didn't come out for me, not on that night or on any other night afterwards. I waited on the nights when there was a full moon, and on the nights which no stars lit, but she didn't come out for me. I got used to going, unafraid even when the dog failed to go with me. As I sat waiting in the dark, I found something in the midst of those small tombstones which was hard to understand when I was young. Indeed it's still hard for me to understand now. I would talk to Maḥāsīn in my heart, without making a sound. I would beg her to come out. I was convinced that she could hear me and that she understood me but something prevented her from coming out.

One particular night Maḥāsin took pity on me and came out for me."

"You were dreaming," said the grey-haired man in a loud voice. "You dozed off next to her grave and you thought you saw her, isn't that the case?"

I kept quiet, so, breathing deeply, he said:- "What happened? What was she like in that dream?"

I thought for a while, then said:- "She was Maḥāsin."

"How was she Maḥāsin?" he said, losing his patience. "She was ... she was Maḥāsin of course, but what was she like?"

"Just like she always was, with a short patched dress and two long plaits hanging down her back, two wide green eyes and a beautiful face."

"But I'm asking you what she did? What did she say in that dream?"

"She leant over me as I sat. She put her hand on my shoulder and embraced me with both arms. Then she kissed me on the cheek like she always used to. She told me not to grieve over her, that she was well and in a beautiful place so I shouldn't grieve over her. Then she told me to leave and said that if I loved her I wouldn't go back to that place again. She didn't want me to."

"And you, what did you do?"

"I did as she asked. I got up and left and didn't go back again, except on feast days with my father and mother. On that night the little dog was with me and he didn't stop barking and whining the whole time."

"Is that everything?"

"Yes, everything."

He slapped his thigh hard, then said:-

"Confound you! Confound you! I tell you about love and dancing; I tell you about life and about a world of beauty, and you tell me about graves and death!"

"When I was a small child, I learnt amongst those graves not to fear death. I realized that it's nothing but a simple journey; a short move to a more beautiful place which we'll love and appreciate far more than we love and appreciate this world of ours. Are you afraid of death?"

"No, I'm immortal."

I laughed.

"How did you find out that I buy them?"

"I found out, but the important thing is why do you buy them?"

I laughed as I said:- "First of all I'm not a philosopher, I'm a poet."

"Really? You play with words instead of playing with life? Can you show me then, what poetry is?"

"I don't know. No one knows. However, since I was a young child, I've loved the words which my sister used to sing. At school too, those expressions in songs which made a melody when we voiced them together used to captivate me. "The horse and the night," "The thicket pigeon"; "We've decayed, but the stars of destiny do not decay"; "Distancing ourselves has become a substitute for us drawing closer together"; "Do not blame my palm if the sword misses the mark, my resolve was correct but fate refused."¹⁴ I used to rejoice over those words when I read or heard them whilst at school, just as I delighted in our village poems, for our region also had its poets, wandering around from village to village. On the *mūlids*¹⁵ they would come and sing of Bahīya and Yāsīn:¹⁶ "Bahīya got a lawyer in the lawcourts ... make your sentence attorney-judge, the oppressed are before you"; and of Hilālī:¹⁷ "When al-Zanāti attacked and revolted against the Hilālī tribe, Abū Zayd said:- "I heartily take up the challenge, you warrior ..." They'd also come to weddings, making their presents for the wedding host out of words. You could see the bridegroom's face shine when they made his name into a tune in the midst of their melodies and when those words suddenly opened doors to worlds which no one had seen before the poets came: "Our bridegroom has brown temples, he is a revolving water wheel watering amidst the greenery." Then, after the bridegroom had been a water wheel, quenching his lover's thirst, one would see a rose springing up in his palm. Yet that rose would be nothing but the face of that lover who another time would be a tall palm tree which he would climb, eating her fresh dates when they were ripe and succulent. There were many images. Melodies of expressions creating image after image. It was my greatest joy to repeat them and hum them, then to imitate them after a while ..."¹⁸

"So did you think that poetry was happiness then?" said the grey-haired man.

"Perhaps," I said. "Yes."

"What about sad poetry, then? That poetry which makes people cry?"

"You're right, mostly. Nevertheless I used to find something other than sadness in sad poetry, or something besides sadness. Look! When you grow sorrowful as you listen to a poem or a song, don't you feel that you change? Don't you feel that you've begun to feel things which you didn't realize you had inside yourself? Aren't those tears also a joy when you suddenly come across that missing part of yourself, that greatest, most excellent part which you can only know through poetry?"

"Nonsense."

"Perhaps, but I feel it and I believe it. I believed it when I was still at school and I too began to go from wedding to wedding and to the parties for those returning from the pilgrimage in our part of the country. I would go to homes when someone passed their school examinations, or when someone recovered from an illness. I began to invent occasions so that I could read my poems to people, for myself to rejoice and for them to rejoice over what I said. The people in our area really did love my words and rejoice over them; my mother and father also delighted in what I said and in the way people loved me. When I came to Cairo to start university, I thought that the city which had created all these songs would talk in poetry, but from my first days there I realized the truth. I realized it at university. You wanted to hear one of my love stories? Then listen ... I loved a certain girl in university. She was quiet, a loner, with a blank stare in her eyes that went far into the distance. Something was about to happen between us. One day we were in the university garden and I found myself reciting poetry to her. She listened seriously to me. When I'd finished her face began to quiver involuntarily. She put her hand over her face, struggling to conceal her laughter. Then she gave in and began to laugh, rocking backwards and forwards as she did so. Finally she said in a haltering voice and tears in her eyes from excessive laughter:- "Excuse me, but the sight of you when you were reciting poetry and when you were so moved by it, was like something out of a comedy film. It only happens in comedy films." Having said that she ran away in embarrassment when she saw my frustration."

The grey-haired man laughed for a long time and said:- "I reckon she was an intelligent girl. You could have done something better than that with the girls from the university, cofound you!"

"Your prayer was answered before you said it," I said. "I didn't finish university. I failed in life. Here I am, employed for a few pence. Even the poetry inside me has gone silent."

"Perhaps you didn't succeed because you recited your poetry to just any old person. If a melody comes to you then preserve it. Don't waste it on someone who doesn't deserve it."

"What if I used to get my happiness from giving?"

"Then live with the riff-raff. You didn't tell me why you buy lottery tickets?"

"Isn't that a strange question? I'm hoping to win of course."

"What if you win?"

"If I win ... I'll wait After paying off some necessary things ... I'll rent a flat that's in good condition; perhaps I'll get married. I'll never find anyone who'll accept me when I'm bankrupt."

His laughter got louder, then he said:- "It's true what I'd supposed. You're a nobody. Your dreams are those of a nobody."

Still laughing, he said:- "By the way, you've won first prize ..."

"I beg your pardon, what did you say?"

"You heard what I said. That's why 'Abbās was asking for you. The top, prize-winning ticket was one of the five which you bought yesterday. That's why the shop owner wanted you and entrusted 'Abbās with telling you the good news. He advised him to keep it a secret so that he'd get a reward. But of course I'm going to take the ticket."

"You're joking," I said. "I've never won anything in my life, not even one of the small prizes for a pound or two .. First prize in one go!"

"Yes, I'm joking," he said absent-mindedly, then he stopped laughing and I saw him bow his head, staring at the ground for a moment. Suddenly he took a pen-knife out of his pocket and opened it quickly. Its blade glistened and I got up screaming:-

"Don't kill me!"

However, he stayed on the ground. He bent over and began to mutter angrily.

I watched him thrust his knife violently into the ground; then he retreated backwards, his fury intensified and he drew the knife once more, then plunged it into the ground. He began to laugh and shout triumphantly. When he raised the knife a small writhing black body hung from it.

"Did you see?" he said. "It's a scorpion."

He moved the knife closer to the fire and I saw the scorpion that was pinned on it. I'd never seen a scorpion before in my life. It was long and black; it began to move its numerous, sinuous legs at great speed, like a cockroach when it's turned on its back. Meanwhile it beat its great arched tail systematically in the direction of its thin body. Each time its tail would hit the knife blade, so it would pull it away. However, it would then repeat the same movement over again, more and more slowly.

I was still standing and trembling. The grey-haired man stood up and pointed the knife and the scorpion at me.

"Why are you afraid?" he said. "Do I look like a murderer? Me ... I never use violence ..."

As he said that, he bent over and began to shake the knife over the embers so that the scorpion fell into the fire. I didn't look but I heard the crackling. I turned my back and walked a couple of steps in the direction of the dead copse so that I wouldn't smell the odour of burning flesh.

He was talking. "Go wherever you please," he said to the scorpion ... "Go to the fire for which you came. You should sleep in the depths of earth now, for that's what you deserve if a false summer attracts you."¹⁹ Then he said: "We need a bigger fire. You try to bring us some branches."

"That's enough," I said. "I'm leaving."

"Were you afraid?" He said. "You don't understand me. I didn't say I'd steal the ticket from you, or that I'd snatch it off you. I said I'd take the ticket. It will be your desire and in your best interests. When I explain it to you, you'll understand everything."

"Then I really have won?"

"Yes, you've won."

"I don't believe it. I don't believe anything you say. There's something incredulous about all your stories. What's the story behind that scorpion? I've never heard that there are scorpions in this city. Even in our village they used to warn us about scorpions but I never saw one. Why do black scorpions manifest themselves to you at night? How do you see them? Who are you? I don't believe you. I don't even believe that you know simple 'Amm 'Abbās. I don't believe any of your stories. I don't believe there was a Hānim."

He went to sit down again, saying calmly:- "If you wish, I'm not forcing you to believe anything."

Then he was quiet and began to clean his knife with a piece of paper he'd taken out of his pocket. When he'd finished he closed it and put it in his pocket.

"I'm leaving now," I said.

"Goodbye."

He didn't look at me but began to roll a new cigarette. I remained standing, trembling from the cold.

Somewhat hesitantly I said:-

"Please ... show me which road to take. I don't know how to return to those back streets by which we came." Without looking at me, he pointed to the main road with his hand, and said:-

"Go down the mountain and walk through the built up area. You don't need to go through the back streets."

I turned round and walked a couple of steps in the direction of the road, then I came back and sat down opposite him.

"I'm staying," I said, "so that you know that I'm not afraid of you. Even if I had won like you say and the tickets were with me, I'd never give them to you. I'm not afraid of you."

He didn't reply to me, nor did he look in my direction. He took a puff of the cigarette then said:- "I don't feel cold. If you want a fire then the trees are in front of you."

Then he began to laugh as he said in a low voice:- "A poet! A poet!"

I was about to get up, but then I stayed put and said:-

"I can endure the cold too, just like you do." Then I laughed, saying:- "Even though I'm not immortal."

However, he continued as if he wasn't listening to me:- "But what kind of a poet? No doubt your poetry is about flats in good condition and the woman who'll agree to marry you."

Then suddenly he began to sing in a rough voice:- "My flat is in good condition ... and her name is Namīra. My flat, o my flat ... Where o where is my wife ..." ²⁰

He laughed loudly again, saying:- "Damn you!"

I got up angrily, saying:- "What's wrong with wanting a flat in good condition? What's wrong with wanting a wife? Doesn't everyone need that?"

He stopped laughing and said slowly and calmly:- "Sit down, sit down. Confound you! A poet? What then, do the ta'miya seller and the restaurant waiter dream of? They also buy lottery tickets... Travelling round the world and discovering the unknown? I thought you were really a poet! You deceived me for a moment and I thought you understood. You really are like all the rest; like the bawwāb and the ta'miya seller and the waiter ..."

"So you know us all? Who are you?"

But he continued:- "Like all the rest.... Like Hānim who's waited for twenty years to win with the dove ticket and to go on the pilgrimage."

"Hānim!" I said.

He didn't answer.

"That fat old woman is Hānim? How did she end up like that?"

He raised his hands and, turning his palms face up, he said:- "She had a good ending. After ʿAbbās stabbed her, Medḥat Bey, her number one lover whom I told you about, treated her and then put her up. Each one needed the other. He needed to get on old object d'art for his house and she needed to go back to where she came from ... Now, there she is with him ... caring for him in his time of need ... making many vows ... roaming around at saints'

birthday celebrations ... carrying loaves of bread and fūl nābit²¹ on her head ... dreaming she'll win with the dove ticket so that she can go on the pilgrimage."

When I sat down he handed the cigarette to me, so I took it.

He sighed and said:- "But let's get back to where we were. You told me you want a flat in good condition? God protect you ! ... And you're asking me what's wrong with a flat ..."

"Let's get back to Hānim," I interrupted him.

"No," he said. "Let's get back to the flat! ... There's nothing wrong with a flat, my friend, except that it should be a palace. There's nothing wrong with a wife, but listen! Listen to me, poet, so long as you think you've understood something. What did you tell me? What was that expression you used ... Death is a simple journey. Good heavens! Listen and I'll tell you an important secret, but don't divulge it to anyone: Death is death, is death." As he said that he laughed again in a loud voice.

"That's your opinion," I said. "But it's not mine".

His laughter dwindled as he said:- "That's not an opinion, but you have to understand. Listen! I'll give you some advice for the fact is that you don't know anything at all so you'll never succeed. Listen my son. The truth is that this life is a trap, a trap that we fall into from the day we're born. The mistake is that we try to get out of that trap ... through poetry as you and a few others like you tried ... through Sufism²² as others besides you have tried ... You see drooping eyes, closed and dead before death ... in fame or position like others have attempted ... vying with one another, making plans and contriving little plots to get there ... and in the end what they reach is their enemy- that brick wall against which they're banging their heads ... I've also seen people trying through alcohol or sex; they have a greed in their eyes which is never satisfied, as if they were drinking in the secret of life itself... I've seen many stupid people raving to accumulate wealth and acquire things as if they would carry those papers and that iron with them to their graves, like our ancient ancestors... All of these poet, are just attempts to deceive death ...to forget that it's standing there, very near ... holding the cords of the trap. When finally it holds out its hand then there's a look of terror and actual disbelief in every eye: the poet's, the God-fearing and the profligates. But I myself will give you some advice. Don't you fall down into the snares. Try to understand. Captured? We've understood.

This life is a trap. Let it be. So get your revenge, get your revenge for as long as you can. Take what you can with both hands. Try to take what you can't take too; take not to acquire things but to get your revenge. Overpower women, that is, only the most beautiful of them. Not to love, but to get your revenge. Don't pay any attention to the riff-raff or the nobodies. Those are blessed. Those shall inherit the earth. So now, if they have something in their hands, then take it. They don't know what to do with what they've got, but you know: you get revenge. So take, don't hesitate, don't let a moment go by without taking."

"But why? Why should I do all that?"

"Are you stupid? Don't you understand? I've told you a thousand times. This life is a trap so get your revenge. If I reached out my hand to slap you, wouldn't you slap me without giving it a second thought? This life is a fat palm, a palm which swoops down over your face from the day you're born and pushes you with one long blow to the grave. So put out your hand, you simpleton, and slap the lioness. Be strong like me."

"How?"

"Be my partner. Give me that ticket."

"Why?"

"For me to invest it for you. How much do you think the first prize is? What do you think you'll do with it? It's not even enough for a flat in good condition and it won't get you a woman who'll agree to marry you. But, with me, it ... How can I explain to you? You'll gamble with it for great stakes, but they're guaranteed. In your hands the money will decrease, in mine it will increase ..."

"But since the amount is so tiny in your eyes then why do you want it? How will it be of use to you, and why do you want me to trust you? Who are you and how did you know that I've won?"

"Not even a crawling ant in Bāb al-Lūq escapes my notice. I know everything."

"Who are you?"

"I'll tell you who I am. I'm an estate agent, a building contractor, a business man; whatever you like. Money is my job and I know very well what to do with it. When they took

the casino away from me and later destroyed it, for the sake of the people of course, I thought it over and said:- "Let it be." Now the money has to come in but without my ^{putting} it into anything that someone could take away from me. I'm a middle-man. Possessions pass through my hands but I don't possess anything, except money of course."

"But you haven't explained to me why you want this particular ticket, since you have money anyway?"

"Not that particular ticket, but I want money. You'll understand why when you become like me. Yes I have money, but when it increases through things such as your ticket, then it really increases, whereas when it doesn't increase, then it decreases. Don't you understand? Don't worry, you'll understand. I told you I'd invest your money for you profitably. We'll take it with us to auctions. We'll buy objects d'art at dirt cheap prices and sell them for gold. No one in Egypt knows the value of things like me. Ask around about me if you like. Perhaps nobody in Bāb al-Lūq likes me but everybody knows who I am. We'll buy cheap land and sell it for many times its original price. We'll do lots of things, and they'll all be legal. I'll give you receipts and you'll receive everything to which you're entitled. You'll know the meaning of having money that increases, not decreases. Then you'll become strong. You won't ever need your paltry salary and you'll be free to encounter life. Then you'll find a thousand women who accept you and when you recite your poetry to them they'll find it beautiful, even if it's about flats in good condition and my cat Namīra. You'll take revenge."

The grey-haired man was quiet. I remained silent too, watching the lower road from which the roar of a convoy of lorries boomed forth as they passed by slowly, one after the other, their fronts packed with coloured lights. Their powerful headlights lit up the sides of the hills and the graves.

I gave a short laugh, saying:- "After I've grown strong, death will come, isn't that so? You too, immortal man, death will come to you ..."

"Death will come when I ask for it."

"Let it be so, but what will you do? Won't there ever be that look of terror and actual disbelief in your eyes too?"

"No," he said calmly. "When I ask for death and it comes to me, I'll save some strength to spit."

"As for me, I've witnessed something else in this world," I said. "Something you've never known."

"I think I've witnessed a bit more than you in the world, so what have you known that I haven't?"

"I know my father. He was a peasant and he owned a small piece of land. He used to go out every morning to work on his land, staying there all day long. Very often he would also stay up at night to guard his crops, but there was never a day when I heard him complain. I never saw tears in his eyes apart from on the day my sister died. Shortly after I started university he was struck by a disease in his thigh which crippled him. He was afflicted with a clot for which we had no treatment except that he lie in bed. We spent what we had and rented the land for many years following. I left university and got a job. He was bed-ridden and would apologise to us for causing all that trouble. When visitors came to see him he would try to get up from his bed out of the respect that custom required they be given. He wasn't pretending but he was really trying to get up. They would swear by their faith and push him forcefully with their hands to stay as he was. I bought him a small radio and he put it close to his ear; scarcely a sound could be heard coming from it. He wouldn't talk to anyone unless someone spoke to him. He would always praise God. If he wanted to ask my mother for something, which he rarely did, he wouldn't tell her "bring this", or "do that". He would say:- "Do you remember last year when we ate such and such a thing?" Or, if he wanted her to prop him up so that he could sit outside the house, he would ask her:- "Have you put the chicks out into the sun, mother so and so? The sun is warm today ..." Sometimes my mother would cry. She would tell him:- "I am your wife and your servant ... so why won't you ask for what you want?" He would invoke God's favour on her and she would do the same for him.

Not once did I hear him talking to her about love, nor did I hear her talking about it either. However, when she helped him to put on his galabeya, when she propped up his back to give him a drink of water, when she massaged his arms and his feet for him with her coarse fingers, covered with blackened cracks near to her nails, then those fingers would speak of something

which surpassed love itself. When my father died I was beside him. I didn't see terror in his eyes but rather there was a beautiful smile on his lips. He gave a final apology for all the pain and disturbance he'd caused us, but contentment and peace filled his eyes."

When I stopped speaking the grey-haired man said:- "What's the meaning of that story?"

"If you didn't understand it then it's no use my explaining it to you."

"Sorry for my stupidity but I understood something else from your story. I understood that if you'd had money you could have paid for your father to be treated, or at least for him to be relieved from the pain of his sickness. Isn't that so?"

"Perhaps."

"Don't you sense that if you'd been strong, you could have helped him and your mother?"

"I did what I could. I loved him. He knew that and it made him happy."

He began to slap his hands, one against the other,²³ saying:- "Now I really am considering murdering you! Was I talking into thin air all that time? Didn't anything go into your head? Didn't you grasp the meaning of what I told you? As for me, I found out the truth when I got to know what the world is. At first I was naive like you. I used to go to a private school and read poetry, books, music and all those things. My father was a rich businessman and I was his only son. I obeyed him and my mother, studying my lessons and playing sports each morning; brushing my teeth with toothpaste every night. But none of that was any use. One day a neighbour of mine came and took me home from school. She told me my father had been injured in a car accident. It wasn't true. The truth was that both my father and my mother had died in a car accident. I was fifteen or sixteen and our neighbour was a European lady of about fifty. When they'd set my father's legacy in order there was nothing left for me except that large flat in Bāb al-Lūq. I didn't even have the money to pay the rent. I was completely alone. However, my neighbour assumed responsibility for me. She owned the casino. She told me that if I wanted to finish my education she would pay for me, or if I wanted she would teach me a trade. Thus I went to the casino.

People thought I was her relative or her son so that's why they called me "Westerner". She told me to let them say that. It would be helpful as in those days Westerners were feared. My neighbour taught me my first lesson. She told me not to get attached to a woman from the casino, however beautiful she might be. I was to let the people fall in love, get drunk and gamble if they wanted but when it came to myself I wasn't to do that. She said that if I wanted to succeed in the world then I shouldn't get attached to anything so that I could own everything. I heeded the lesson, so when my neighbour left the country years later, I had enough money to buy the casino. At that time she told me:- "Now I'm happy because you've learnt everything. Now I'm not worried about you." Indeed, I'd learnt to be strong, strong enough to possess a person. I don't mean money of course, for though it's necessary, it's only so you can possess and thereby become strong and free. If you can be lord of your life you can take revenge on the world by doing whatever you want. Don't ever think poet, that it's an easy thing to do, for how few strong people there are in this world, and how many are the riff-raff.

In my youth I was the kind of man women love so I chose whoever I wanted and enjoyed myself a lot. However, not one of them possessed me. Then Hānim came. She was something new for me. She actually possessed me, not I her. She was a small, beautiful plaything between me and that earthly trap. She was inaccessible? That was wonderful. Obtaining her afterwards was even more wonderful. Everyone knows that women are no fun when they throw themselves at you without putting up a fight. The more difficult they are to get, the more pleasurable it is. She loved 'Abbās? She would cling onto him? She'd live as his slave? Let it be so. We would see. One morning I summoned 'Abbās. He didn't suspect anything. He came, humble and submissive as usual when he stood in front of me. When I spoke to him, he would tilt his head and cross the fingers of both his hands together as they hung loosely in front of his body. I pretended to be angry, the reason for which he couldn't understand. I told him:- "'Abbās, from tonight you're not to come here again, I don't want you any longer." He asked why, so I invented something for him, some kind of negligence, a quarrel in the casino which he hadn't reported, or something which had been lost and he hadn't realized it. I don't remember what I told him anymore. But I remember how he stayed standing in front of me, mumbling and raising his hand to his chest, to his head and his neck, swearing with

oaths and saying things. I remember that he rushed to the desk and kissed my hand as his tears fell. I told him:- "‘Abbās, you know me. I don't go back on my word. Take what's due to you for this month and leave."

Days passed. He used to come every night and stand, his body looking like a tree trunk, on the pavement opposite the casino. He would raise his hand to greet me when I went into the casino, and when I came out at dawn I would find him still standing there. I'd pretend not to see him. I'd arranged everything with the other casino owners. We would exchange small courtesies with one another. We wouldn't snatch up the artistes or the employees of other casinos unless the owner of the casino in which they were working agreed. Thus ‘Abbās didn't find anyone for whom he could work, and in those days it was hard to find any kind of work whatsoever. I knew ‘Abbās like I knew Hānim, like I knew the back of my hand. I knew exactly what he would do. I knew that he, with his small, stupid mind would refuse to let Hānim spend any money on him, however much she was earning, for he was the man, that chivalrous, gallant man.

I waited. In those days I left Hānim completely alone. I didn't leave my office in the casino. I would hear the drum and the lute and would imagine what she was doing in time to those soft drumbeats and those high pitched vibrations on the lute strings. I would see her long thighs moving and turning, her rosey lips open wide as she panted and the sweat ran across her face. Perhaps now she would put out her tongue as she danced, to lick the sweat from her lips, or stretch it to wipe the sweat from her glistening chest. I would see all that in my office with my eyes closed as I waited. I knew when ‘Abbās would run out of money. I knew when he would refuse what money she offered him. I knew when he would fight with her and when he'd throw her out of his room. I knew when Hānim would come. Yes, exactly. There I was, listening to the drum and the lute playing faster than on other nights. I heard the shouts and exclamations of the audience, louder than on other nights, and there was the dancing ending early that night. Yes, exactly ... there she was ... Outside the shouting got louder:- "Nānā ... Nānā ..." The door opened and Hānim came in. She came into the office and locked the door behind her. Her hair was dishevelled. Sweat covered her cleaved chest as it panted and groaned. She threw herself down, sitting on the sofa that was opposite my desk... stretched her legs out in front of her and tried to catch her breath as she gave me a long, steady look

with her wide eyes. She said nothing, neither did I. She understood and so did I. But suddenly her long black eyelashes quivered and her eyes glistened with tears that danced. In one breath she said:- "Will you take 'Abbās back?" However I raised my finger and told her:- "When I want to."

"That's how she came to me, my friend. Sorry for herself and tears streaming down her cheeks. Nevertheless, Hānim didn't know me. No, my friend, prior to that night she didn't know me. I was a king of love. I don't know how that brute 'Abbās used to love her, but with me she got to know a different kind of love, quite unlike that of the riff-raff. It was a love that was also fit for a queen. I dived with her into seas which she'd never known before; she'd never even heard of their existence. On those seas her beautiful virgin sails flapped with joy that she'd never dreamt there was in this world. I used to watch the amazement and joy in her eyes day after day. I'd watch the ecstasy in her body as she danced every night, lightly, drunk with happiness, as if she wanted to shake off everything except that new joy which she carried within. She no longer had a body or weight, but she was pure transparent joy dancing, transformed into brightness and radiance, throwing light and blessing onto the spectators that they'd never known before. They would indeed be struck by madness as they called out to her. She would be incarnated before them for a moment; that secret, that life, that truth which they had spent their lives looking for but hadn't found. But there she was now, in front of them, just once, for a moment of their lifetime. When the dancing finished and I went on ahead of her to my office, she would follow me, her eyes shining and her body trembling. She would bend over and fall on her knees. She'd kiss my hand and lick it, rubbing her face on my body like a pleading cat.

When Hānim stopped asking about 'Abbās, I brought him back.

I didn't say anything to her, so she was startled to see him wandering round the casino that night when she came in. She came and asked me with a fearful look:- "You've brought 'Abbās back?" "Yes," I said, "and now you've to go back to him." "How?" she said. "Like that," I said. "What's between you and me is over. Go back to 'Abbās." Then she stayed away from the casino for a few days and what happened, happened."

"Did you tell ʿAbbās about what happened between you and advise him to take revenge on her?"

"Absolutely not. I didn't say a word to him. I simply brought him back to work."

"But you knew what would happen."

"I knew that I was finished with Hānim."

"Or perhaps you knew you had to finish with her."

"If I hadn't, where would I have ended up, poet? As one of the riff-raff. Should I have behaved like ʿAbbās? Should I have ended up like him? Carrying a box in my hand and roaming around the coffee shops in search of my livelihood? I would get news of both him and her. Hānim didn't believe what had happened at first. She thought I was testing her love for me. She refused to go back to ʿAbbās, then she waited for me to go back. Whilst she waited, the hope waning inside her, her dancing also waned night after night. The magic vanished and Hānim the singer came back. She'd shake her backside, quiver her breasts, bare her thighs and move absent-mindedly, scarcely stepping in time with the rhythm or melody. People watched in amazement. "What's happened? Where is Hānim?" No one knew that Hānim had died. It was easier for you to call out to your sister in the graves and for her to come back to you than it was for the old Hānim to come back. However, ʿAbbās didn't believe it. He stood there on one particular night, staring at Hānim as she stood silently on the stage, arms stretched out, absent-minded as the drum followed a faint but continuous rhythm. The drum also tried to wake her up, to bring her back, but Hānim stood there, a slender but motionless corpse with its arms stretched out. ʿAbbās ran. He ran to her, climbed onto the stage, seized her by the shoulders and began to shake and slap her. He lifted her off the ground and threw her back down, again and again, saying:- "Dance! Dance you prostitute!" After all that when he stood her on her feet, Hānim looked silently at him with her two wide eyes and stretched out her hand. Then she tore the front of her dress and beat her naked chest. She beat her flesh, saying:- "Put a dance into my body ʿAbbās ... put a dance into it." ʿAbbās pulled her by her long hair, tilted her head then cut her neck ..."

The grey-haired man was silent. So was I ...

After a while I said:- "Now I believe you."

"What do you believe?"

"... That you never loved Hānim. You did what your neighbour told you and never loved anything."

"I gave the world its blows back."

"You lied to me when you made me believe that you once loved this city and that you loved Bāb al-Lūq, but now I know you. Yes, how could I have failed to realize from the beginning. Aren't you the one who cut down all the trees in the city? Aren't you the one who destroyed its beautiful little houses?"

He laughed, saying:- "You're mad. I've never in my life cut even a branch, nor have I destroyed even a brick."

"Yes, just like your hand didn't slaughter Hānim."

"What happened to Hānim? She went back to where she'd come from. Isn't that the case? She forgot me and forgot 'Abbās and perhaps she forgot how she herself was in those days long gone by. We all meet up in Bāb al-Lūq but neither of us talks to the other. Perhaps she'll look into my face every two or three years as she's walking along the street, pulling her huge body along and carrying a chicken or a bag of fruit in her hand. She'll stop, scrutinize my face and say:- "How are you, Westerner?" as if she's trying to remember who I am. Yes, my friend, that's Hānim, that's the ending which you came here to hear. Now you know everything. Isn't that so? Everything has been said. You've found out how those that the world strikes end up, and what you have to do to give the world its blows back. What have you chosen?"

"Are you refering to the ticket?"

"I'm refering to more than that, but now I'm refering to the ticket, yes ..."

"I can't give it to you. I believe you. Yes, I believe that you can do things with it that I can't do. I believe that you can win me a lot of money and that in your hands it will increase whereas in mine it will decrease, but I can't ..."

"If you know all that, then aren't you stupid to refuse?"

As I got up, I gave a short laugh, saying:- "I think I'm one of the riff-raff."

He sighed and said:- "Yes, you're not lying."

"Do you want to know something else?" I said. "I think I want to continue to be one of them. Goodbye."

I turned round and took the path to the hill-slope. When I'd moved a couple of steps away, he called me ... "Poet!" he said.

I turned to him. He was sitting, supporting himself with his hands on his knees, his head bent over and his soft white hair hanging down over both sides of his face. He was laughing softly. Then, shaking his head and without looking at me, he said:-

"Poet! You'll look for me and you'll come back to me."

I stood still and said:- "Who knows, maybe you'll look for me."

"I don't think so," he said.

I started to walk again. The stars had begun to withdraw from the sky and a white cloud began to colour the night.

Somewhere in the middle of the graves a cock crowed.

Notes to "A Hill-top Discussion"

1. Bāb al-Lūq: a famous, upper-class residential area in down-town Cairo.
2. Bey : A title of courtesy given to rich, influential people.
3. Caftan : A long sleeved outer garment, reaching to the ground and fastened by a belt.
4. ṭa^cmīya : A popular food eaten mainly by poorer people for breakfast. It consists of dried broad beans, soaked and pounded together with herbs and spices, shaped into balls or patties and deep fried in oil.
5. Bawwāb : Literally translated as doorman. A doorman's responsibility in Egypt goes beyond that of standing at the door to check who enters the building. He will also run errands for the flat occupants, do odd jobs and be in charge of the general building maintenance.
6. ^cAmm : Literally translated as uncle. It is also a friendly term of address used for older men.
7. ^cAbdīn : A middle-class residential area adjacent to Bāb al-Lūq.
8. Galabeya : A long wide garment reaching to the ankles, looking rather like a night-shirt. It is worn in the home and on the streets by the poorest classes.
9. Azhār : Means flowers.
10. Kufīyeh : A large rectangular piece of cotton or woolen material, folded diagonally and worn by poorer men on their heads.
11. Pasha : Formerly a title of, form of address and reference to highest ranking officers and officials.

12. Fūl : Dried broad beans cooked in a stoppered container over a slow heat.
13. The evil eye : A prevalent superstitious belief, particularly amongst the lower classes in Egypt. A jealous look, or a compliment made particularly about one's children, is believed to have power to bring evil to the person to whom it is directed.
14. These are all extracts from famous stanzas of poetry.
15. Mūlid : A festival held each year to celebrate the birth of a Muslim saint. Sufi's perform religious worship services; children enjoy the carousels, sweets, dolls and paper hats on sale for those with a little money. Artisans such as poets would go to recite their poems and earn some money.
16. Bahīya and Yāsīn : A popular Egyptian Ballad. Yāsīn and Bahīya are poor peasants exploited by a greedy rich landowner. Yāsīn longs to marry Bahīya but can never make enough money from the land to provide her a home to live in.
17. Hilālī : Another folkloric tale, very famous particularly in Upper Egypt. It depicts the struggle between the folkloric hero Abū Zayd al-Hilālī and his enemy Khalīfa al-Zanāti.
18. These are extracts from folk poetry.
19. Scorpions only come out in summer. This one mistook the heat of the fire for the arrival of summer.
20. This is an extract from a children's song. The grey-haired man is mocking the narrator's poetical talents.
21. Fūl Nābit : Dried beans, soaked until they sprout.
22. Sufism : The 'mystical' side of Islam, often including elements of Folk Islam.
23. A sign of despair, demonstrating that one thinks the situation is hopeless.

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