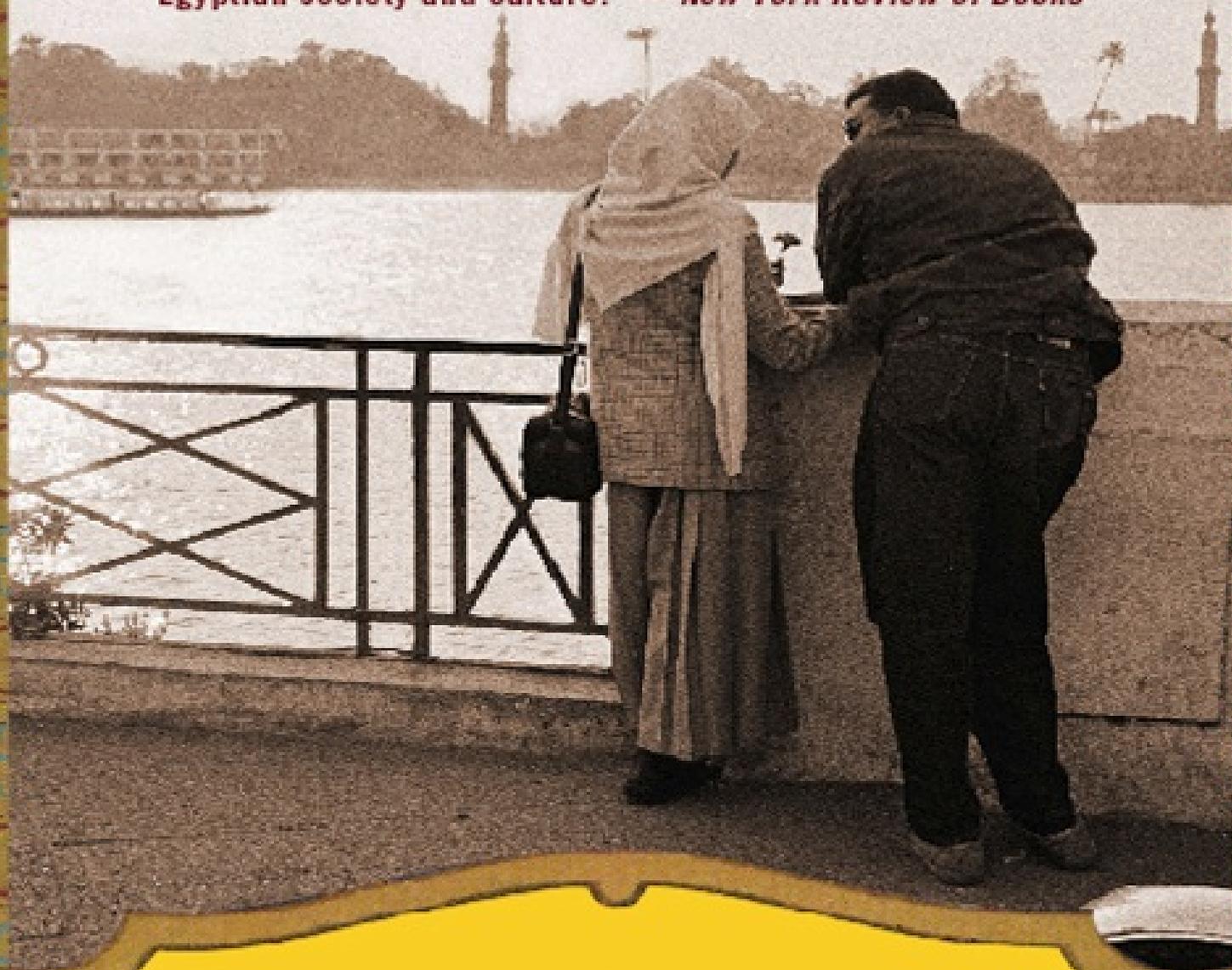


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THE
YACoubIAN BUILDING

A NOVEL

ALAA AL ASWANY

The Yacoubian Building

Alaa Al Aswany

Translated by

Humphrey Davies

 HarperCollins e-books

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Cast of Characters

Abaskharon: Zaki Bey's servant and the brother of Malak. His right leg was amputated when he was younger.

Abd Rabbuh: A police officer from northern Egypt doing military service in Cairo. He has a wife and a son, but is the love interest of Hatim Rasheed.

Busayna: The oldest daughter of a poor family that lives in the shacks on the roof of the Yacoubian Building. When her father died, she began earning money for her family by working at a clothing shop. She is Taha's childhood sweetheart and wonders if their relationship will last.

Dawlat el Dessouki: Zaki Bey's older sister, with whom he lives. While Zaki Bey loves her, they fight constantly. She has been married three times and has two children.

Fikri Abd el Shaheed: A lawyer and agent for the Yacoubian Building.

Hagg Muhammad Azzam: An extremely wealthy and successful businessman who started out as an immigrant shining shoes on the street. His business is located in the Yacoubian Building, and he aspires to hold a political office. He has a wife and three sons—Fawzi, Qadri, and Hamdi.

Hatim Rasheed: The editor in chief of *Le Caire*, a French language newspaper in Cairo. He is the son of aristocrats and his mother was French. He is a closeted homosexual who frequents Chez Nous, a gay bar in Cairo, and is in love with Abd Rabbuh. He lives in an apartment in the Yacoubian Building.

Kamal el Fouli: He is a secretary of the Patriotic Party; although he grew up in poverty, he has become a corrupt politician with major power over Egyptian elections.

Malak: A Christian shirtmaker and tailor, he longs to have a shop in the Yacoubian Building. Abaskharon is his brother.

Souad Gaber: She is a secretary from Alexandria with a son, Tamir, and has no husband. She catches the eye of Hagg Azzam and becomes his second wife.

Taha el Shazli: The son of the Yacoubian Building doorkeeper, who lives in shacks on the roof. He is a very devout Muslim who aspires to be a police officer and is in love with Busayna.

Zaki Bey el Dessouki: An aging playboy with inherited wealth, but is a failed engineer. He is the youngest son of Abd el Aal Basha Dessouki, who was a former prime minister and one of the richest men in Egypt before the revolution. He lives with his sister Dawlat, and has an office in the Yacoubian Building.

Translator's Note

Alaa Al Aswany, born in 1957 and a dentist by profession, has written from an early age. His published works include novels, short stories, and a novella, as well as prolific contributions on literature, politics, and social issues to newspapers and magazines covering the political spectrum. *The Yacoubian Building* is his second published novel. Since appearing in 2002, it has gone through several editions and was the bestselling Arabic novel for the years 2002 and 2003. It was voted Best Novel for 2003 by listeners to Egypt's Middle East Broadcasting service. In 2004 Al Aswany published a novella and nine short stories in Arabic in a collection called *Niran Sadiqa (Friendly Fire)*. He is at work on a novel entitled *Chicago*.

The Yacoubian Building exists, at the address given in the novel. Indeed, it was there that the author's father (Abbas Al Aswany, himself a noted author and winner of the State Prize for Literature for 1974) maintained an office, and there that the author opened his first dental clinic. However, a wanderer on Cairo's Suleiman Basha Street will notice that the real Yacoubian Building does not match its literary namesake in every detail: rather than being in the "high European style" and boasting "balconies decorated with Greek faces carved from stone," it is a restrained albeit elegant exercise in art deco, innocent of balconies. Similarly, the real Halebogaz's Bar is situated on Abd el Khaliq Sarwat Street, rather than Antikkhana Street. The same logic applies to the characters: while many Egyptian readers believe they know who a given character "really" is, few are portraits from life and in most cases a number of originals have contributed aspects to them. Likewise, the reader need not pay too much heed to the fact that the events described nominally take place before and during Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait: the novel reflects the Egypt of the present.

It would be a mistake, in other words, to assume that everything mentioned in *The Yacoubian Building* is an exact portrait of an identifiable existing original. While the world of the book is undeniably that of today's Egypt, the author achieves this sense of verisimilitude by taking recognizable features from multiple known originals to form new creations. That these collages are so convincing is a measure of the novel's genius and explains in part its appeal.

Inevitably, the book contains numerous references to people and events that are likely to be unfamiliar to the non-Egyptian reader. These are explained in the Glossary at the end of the book. Quotations from the Qur'an are italicized and Arberry's translation has been used (Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted*, Oxford University Press, 1998); a list of references follows the Glossary.

While taking full responsibility for any errors, the translator acknowledges his debt to Siham Abdel Salam, Jacinthe Assaad, Madiha Doss, Maria Golia, Fawzi Mansour, A. Rushdi Nasef, Sayed Ragab, Diya Rashwan, and, above all, the author for help on various aspects of the text.

This translation is dedicated to Gasim.

The distance between Baehler Passage, where Zaki Bey el Dessouki lives, and his office in the Yacoubian Building is not more than a hundred meters, but it takes him an hour to cover it each morning as he is obliged to greet his friends on the street. Clothing- and shoe-store owners, their employees (of both sexes), waiters, cinema staff, habitués of the Brazilian Coffee Stores, even doorkeepers, shoeshine men, beggars, and traffic cops—Zaki Bey knows them all by name and exchanges greetings and news with them. Zaki Bey is one of the oldest residents of Suleiman Basha Street, to which he came in the late 1940s after his return from his studies in France and which he has never thereafter left. To the residents of the street he cuts a well-loved, folkloric figure when he appears before them in his three-piece suit (winter and summer, its bagginess hiding his tiny, emaciated body); with his carefully ironed handkerchief always dangling from his jacket pocket and always of the same color as his tie; with his celebrated cigar, which, in his glory days, was Cuban deluxe but is now of the foul-smelling, tightly packed, low-quality local kind; and with his old, wrinkled face, his thick glasses, his gleaming false teeth, and his dyed black hair, whose few locks are arranged in rows from the leftmost to the rightmost side of his head in the hope of covering the broad, naked, bald patch. In brief, Zaki Bey el Dessouki is something of a legend, which makes his presence both much looked for and completely unreal, as though he might disappear at any moment, or as though he were an actor playing a part, of whom it is understood that once done he will take off his costume and put his original clothes back on. If we add to the above his jolly temperament, his unceasing stream of scabrous jokes, and his amazing ability to engage in conversation anyone he meets as though he were an old friend, we will understand the secret of the warm welcome with which everyone on the street greets him. Indeed Zaki Bey has only to appear at the top end of the street at around ten in the morning for the salutations to ring out from every side, and often a number of his disciples among the young men who work in the stores will rush up to him to ask him jokingly about certain sexual matters that remain obscure to them, in which case Zaki Bey will draw on his vast and encyclopedic knowledge of the subject to explain to the youths—in great detail, with the utmost pleasure, and in a voice audible to all—the most subtle sexual secrets. Sometimes, in fact, he will ask for a pen and paper (provided in the twinkling of an eye) so that he can draw clearly for the young men some curious coital position that he himself tried in the days of his youth.

Some important information on Zaki Bey el Dessouki should be provided. He is the youngest son of Abd el Aal Basha el Dessouki, the well-known pillar of the Wafd who was prime minister on more than one occasion and was one of the richest men before the Revolution, he and his family owning more than five thousand feddans of prime agricultural land.

Zaki Bey studied engineering in Paris. It had been expected, of course, that he would play a leading political role in Egypt using his father's influence and wealth, but suddenly the Revolution erupted and everything changed. Abd el Aal Basha was arrested and brought before the revolutionary tribunal and, though the charge of political corruption failed to stick, he remained in detention for a while and most of his possessions were confiscated and distributed among the peasants under the land reform. Under the impact of all this the Basha soon died, the father's misfortune leaving its mark also on the son. The engineering office that he opened in the Yacoubian Building quickly failed and was transformed with time into the place where Zaki Bey spends his free time each day reading the newspapers, drinking coffee, meeting friends and lovers, or sitting for hours on the balcony contemplating the passersby and traffic on Suleiman Basha.

It must be said, however, that the failure that Engineer Zaki el Dessouki has met with in his professional life should not be attributed entirely to the Revolution; it stems rather, at base, from the feebleness of his ambition and his obsession with sensual pleasure. Indeed his life, which has lasted sixty-five years so far, revolves with all its comings and goings, both happy and painful almost entirely around one word—women. He is one of those who fall completely and hopelessly into the sweet clutches of captivity of the female and for whom women are not a lust that flares up and, once satisfied, is extinguished, but an entire world of fascination that constantly renews itself in images of infinitely alluring diversity—the firm, voluptuous bosoms with swelling nipples like delicious grape the backsides, pliable and soft, quivering as though in anticipation of his violent assault from behind, the painted lips that drink kisses and moan with pleasure; the hair in all its manifestations (long, straight, and demure, or long and wild with disordered tresses, or medium-length, domestic and well-settled, or that short hair *à la garçon* that evokes unfamiliar, boyish kinds of sex). And the eyes...ah, how lovely are the looks from those eyes—honest or dissimulating and duplicitous; bold or demure; even furious, reproachful, and filled with loathing!

So much and even more did Zaki Bey love women. He had known every kind, starting with Lady Kamla, daughter of the former king's maternal uncle, with whom he learned the etiquette and rites of the royal bed chambers—the candles that burn all night, the glasses of French wine that kindle the flames of desire and obliterate fear, the hot bath before the assignation, when the body is anointed with creams and perfumes. From Lady Kamla (she of the inexorable appetite) he learned how to start and when to desist and how to ask for the most abandoned sexual positions in extremely refined French. Zaki Bey has also slept with women of all classes—oriental dancers, foreigners, society ladies and the wives of the eminent and distinguished, university and secondary school students, even fallen women, peasant women, and housemaids. Every one had her special flavor, and he would often laughingly compare the bedding of Lady Kamla with its rules of protocol and that of that beggar woman he picked up one night when drunk in his Buick and took back to his apartment in Baehler Passage, and whom he discovered, when he went into the bathroom with her to wash her body himself to be so poor that she made her underwear out of empty cement sacks. He can still remember, with a mixture of tenderness and distress, the woman's embarrassment as she took off her bloomers, on which was written in large letters "Portland Cement—Tura." He remembers too that she was one of the most beautiful of all the women he has known and one of the most ardent in love.

All these varied and teeming experiences have made of Zaki el Dessouki a true expert on women and in "the science of women," as he calls it, he has strange and eccentric theories that, whether one accepts or rejects them, definitely deserve consideration. Thus he believes, for example, that the outstandingly lovely woman is usually a cold lover in bed, while women of middling beauty or even

a certain degree of ugliness are always more passionate because they are truly in need of love and will make every effort in their power to please their lovers. Zaki Bey also believes that how a woman pronounces the letter “s”—specifically—is a clue as to how ardent she will be when making love. Thus, if a woman says a word such as “Susu” or “basbusa,” for example, in a tremulous, arousing way, he concludes immediately that she is gifted in bed, and that the opposite will also be true. Zaki Bey also believes that every woman on the face of the earth is surrounded by a sort of ethereal field inhabited by vibrations that though invisible and inaudible can nevertheless be vaguely felt, and that one who has trained himself to read these vibrations can divine the degree to which that woman is sexually satisfied. Thus no matter how respectable and modest the woman, Zaki Bey is able to sense her sexual hunger from the trembling of her voice or her nervous, affectedly exaggerated laugh, or even from the warmth radiated by her hand when he shakes it. As for the women who are possessed by a satanic lust that they can never quench (“*les filles de joie*,” as Zaki Bey calls them)—those mysterious women who feel that they truly exist only when in bed and making love and who place no other pleasure in life on the same footing as sex, those unhappy beings fated by virtue of their excessive thirst for pleasure to meet with a terrifying and unavoidable fate—those women, Zaki el Dessouki asserts, are all the same, even though their faces may vary. He will invite any who doubt the fact to inspect the pictures published in the newspapers of women sentenced to be executed for participating with their lovers in the murder of their husbands, saying, “We shall discover—with a little observation—that they all have the same countenance: the lips generally full, sensual, relaxed, and not pressed together; the features thick and libidinous; and the look bright and empty, like that of a hungry animal.”

It was Sunday. The stores on Suleiman Basha closed their doors, and the bars and cinemas were full of customers. With its locked stores and old-fashioned, European-style buildings the street seemed dark and empty, as though it were in a sad, romantic, European film. At the start of the day, Shazli, the old doorman, moved his seat from next to the elevator to the sidewalk in front of the Yacoubian Building to watch the people going in and out on their day off.

Zaki el Dessouki got to his office a little before noon and from the first instant Abaskharon, the office servant, took in the situation. After twenty years of working for Zaki Bey, Abaskharon had learned to understand his moods at a single glance, knowing full well what it meant when his master arrived at the office excessively elegantly dressed, the scent of the expensive perfume that he kept for special occasions preceding him, and appeared tense and nervous, standing up, sitting down, walking irritably about, never settling to anything, and hiding his impatience in brusqueness and gruffness—it meant that the Bey was expecting his first meeting with a new girlfriend. As a result Abaskharon didn't get angry when the Bey started berating him for no reason, but shook his head as one who understands how things stand, quickly finished sweeping the reception room, and then grabbed his wooden crutches and pounded vigorously and rapidly off down the long tiled corridor to the large room where the Bey was sitting. In a voice that experience had taught him to make completely neutral he said, “Do you have a meeting, Excellency? Should I get everything ready, Excellency?”

The Bey looked in his direction and contemplated him for an instant as though making up his mind as to the proper tone of voice to use in reply. He looked at Abaskharon's striped flannel gallabiya, torn in numerous places, at his crutches and his amputated leg, at his aged face and the grizzled stubble on his chin, at his cunning, narrow eyes and the familiar unctuous, scared smile that never left him, and said, “Get everything ready for a meeting, quickly.”

~~Thus spoke the Bey in brusque tones as he went out onto the balcony. In their common~~ dictionary, “a meeting” meant the Bey’s spending time alone with a woman in the office, and “everything” referred to certain rites that Abaskharon performed for his master just before the love-making, starting with an injection of imported Tri-B vitamin supplement that he administered to him in the buttock and that hurt him so much each time that he would moan out loud and pour curses on “that ass” Abaskharon for his heavy, brutish touch. This would be followed by a cup of sugarless coffee made of beans spiced with nutmeg that the bey would imbibe slowly while dissolving beneath his tongue a small piece of opium. The rites concluded with the placing of a large plate of salad in the middle of the table next to a bottle of Black Label whisky, two empty glasses, and a metal champagne bucket filled to the brim with ice cubes.

Abaskharon quickly set about getting everything ready while Zaki Bey took a seat on the balcony overlooking Suleiman Basha, lit a cigar, and settled down to watch the passersby. His feelings swung between bounding impatience for the beautiful meeting and promptings of anxiety that his sweetheart Rabab would fail to turn up for the appointment, in which case he would have wasted the entire month of effort that he had expended in pursuit of her. He had been obsessed with her since he first saw her at the Cairo Bar in Tawfikiya Square where she worked as a hostess. She had bewitched him completely and day after day he had gone back to the bar to see her. Describing her to an aged friend, he had said, “She represents the beauty of the common people in all its vulgarity and provocativeness. She looks, though she had just stepped out of one of those paintings by Mahmoud Said.” Zaki Bey then expatiated on this to make his meaning clearer to his friend, saying, “Do you remember that maid at home who used to beguile your dreams when you were an adolescent? And of whom it was your dearest wish that you might stick yourself to her soft behind, then grab her tender-skinned breasts with your hands as she washed the dishes at the kitchen sink? And that she would bend over in a way that made you stick to her even more closely and whisper in provocative refusal, before giving herself to you, ‘Sir.... It’s wrong, sir...?’ In Rabab I have stumbled onto just such a treasure.”

However, stumbling onto a treasure does not necessarily mean possessing it and, for the sake of his beloved Rabab, Zaki Bey had been compelled to put up with numerous annoyances, like having to spend whole nights in a dirty, cramped, badly lit and poorly ventilated place like the Cairo Bar. He had been almost suffocated by the crowds and the thick cigarette smoke and had come close to being deafened by the racket of the sound system that never even for an instant stopped emitting disgusting vulgar songs. And that was to say nothing of the foul-mouthed arguments and fistfights among the patrons of the establishment, who were a mixture of skilled laborers, bad types, and foreigners, or of the glasses of foul, stomach-burning brandy that he was forced to toss down every night and the exorbitant mistakes in the checks to which he turned a blind eye, even leaving a big tip for the house plus another even bigger one that he would thrust into the cleavage of Rabab’s dress, feeling, as soon as his fingers touched her full, swaying breasts, the hot blood surging in his veins and a violence of desire that almost hurt him it was so powerful and insistent.

Zaki Bey had put up with all of this for the sake of Rabab, inviting her again and again to meet him outside the bar. She would refuse coquettishly and he would repeat his invitation, never losing hope, and then just yesterday she had agreed to visit him at the office. So overjoyed had he been that he had thrust a fifty-pound note into her dress without the slightest feeling of regret, and she had come up to him so close that he had felt her hot breath on his face and, biting her lower lip with her teeth, she had whispered in a provocative voice that demolished what equanimity he had left, “Tomorrow,

I'll pay you back, sir...for everything you've done for me..."

Zaki Bey bore the painful Tri-B injection, dissolved the opium, and started slowly drinking the first glass of whisky, followed by a second and a third, which soon released him from his tension. Good humor enveloped him and pleasant musings started gently caressing his head like soft tunes. Rabab's appointment was for one o'clock, and by the time the wall clock struck two, Zaki Bey had almost lost hope, when suddenly he heard the sound of Abaskharon's crutches striking the hallway tiles, followed immediately by his face appearing around the door as he said, his voice panting with excitement as though the news genuinely made him happy, "Madame Rabab has arrived, Excellency."

In 1934, Hagop Yacoubian, the millionaire and then doyen of the Armenian community in Egypt, decided to construct an apartment block that would bear his name. He chose for it the best site on Suleiman Basha and engaged a well-known Italian engineering firm to build it, and the firm came up with a beautiful design—ten lofty stories in the high classical European style, the balconies decorated with Greek faces carved in stone, the columns, steps, and corridors all of natural marble, and the late model of elevator by Schindler. Construction continued for two whole years, at the end of which there emerged an architectural gem that so exceeded expectations that its owner requested of the Italian architect that he inscribe his name, Yacoubian, on the inside of the doorway in large Latin characters that were lit up at night in neon, as though to immortalize his name and emphasize his ownership of the gorgeous building.

The cream of the society of those days took up residence in the Yacoubian Building—ministers, big land-owning bashas, foreign manufacturers, and two Jewish millionaires (one of them belonging to the famous Mosseri family). The ground floor of the building was divided equally between a spacious garage with numerous doors at the back where the residents' cars (most of them luxury makes such as Rolls-Royce, Buick, and Chevrolet) were kept overnight and at the front a large store with three frontages that Yacoubian kept as a showroom for the silver products made in his factories. This showroom remained in business successfully for four decades, then little by little declined, until recently it was bought by Hagg Muhammad Azzam, who reopened it as a clothing store. On the broad roof two rooms with utilities were set aside for the doorkeeper and his family to live in, while on the other side of the roof fifty small rooms were constructed, one for each apartment in the building. Each of these rooms was no more than two meters by two meters in area and the walls and doors were all of solid iron and locked with padlocks whose keys were handed over to the owners of the apartments. These iron rooms had a variety of uses at that time, such as storing foodstuffs, overnight kenneling for dogs (if they were large or fierce), and laundering clothes, which in those days (before the spread of the electric washing machine) was undertaken by professional washerwomen who would do the wash in the room and hang it out on long lines that extended across the roof. The rooms were never used as places for the servants to sleep, perhaps because the residents of the building at that time were aristocrats and foreigners who could not conceive of the possibility of any human being sleeping in such a cramped place. Instead, they would set aside a room in their ample, luxurious apartments (which sometimes contained eight or ten rooms on two levels joined by an internal stairway) for the servants.

In 1952 the Revolution came and everything changed. The exodus of Jews and foreigners from Egypt started, and every apartment that was vacated by reason of the departure of its owners was taken over by an officer of the armed forces, who were the influential people of the time. By the 1960s, half

the apartments were lived in by officers of various ranks, from first lieutenants and recently married captains all the way up to generals, who would move into the building with their large families. General El Dakrouri (at one point director of President Muhammad Naguib's office) was even able to acquire two large apartments next door to one another on the tenth floor, one of which he used as a residence for himself and his family, the other as a private office where he would meet petitioners in the afternoon.

The officers' wives began using the iron rooms in a different way: for the first time they were turned into places for the stewards, cooks, and young maids that they brought from their villages to serve their families to stay in. Some of the officers' wives were of plebeian origin and could see nothing wrong in raising small animals (rabbits, ducks, and chickens) in the iron rooms, and the West Cairo District's registers saw numerous complaints filed by the old residents to prevent the raising of such animals on the roof. Owing to the officers' pull, however, these always got shelved, until the residents complained to General El Dakrouri, who, thanks to his influence with the former, was able to put a stop to this unsanitary phenomenon.

In the seventies came the "Open Door Policy" and the well-to-do started to leave the downtown area for El Mohandiseen and Medinet Nasr, some of them selling their apartments in the Yacoubian Building, others using them as offices and clinics for their recently graduated sons or renting them furnished to Arab tourists. The result was that the connection between the iron rooms and the building's apartments was gradually severed, and the former stewards and servants ceded them for money to new, poor residents coming from the countryside or working somewhere downtown who needed a place to live that was close by and cheap.

This transfer of control was made easier by the death of the Armenian agent in charge of the building, Monsieur Grigor, who used to administer the property of the millionaire Hagop Yacoubian with the utmost honesty and accuracy, sending the proceeds in December of each year to Switzerland where Yacoubian's heirs had migrated after the Revolution. Grigor was succeeded as agent by Maître Fikri Abd el Shaheed, the lawyer, who would do anything provided he was paid, taking, for example, one large percentage from the former occupant of the iron room and another from the new tenant for writing him a contract for the room.

The final outcome was the growth of a new community on the roof that was entirely independent of the rest of the building. Some of the newcomers rented two rooms next to one another and made a small residence out of them with all utilities (latrine and washroom), while others, the poorest, collaborated to create a shared latrine for every three or four rooms, the roof community thus coming to resemble any other popular community in Egypt. The children run around all over the roof barefoot and half naked and the women spend the day cooking, holding gossip sessions in the sun, and, frequently, quarreling, at which moments they will exchange the grossest insults as well as accusations touching on one another's honor, only to make up soon after and behave with complete goodwill toward one another as though nothing has happened. Indeed, they will plant hot, lip-smacking kisses on each other's cheeks and even weep from excess of sentiment and affection.

The men pay little attention to the women's quarrels, viewing them as just one more indication of the defectiveness of mind of which the Prophet—God bless him and grant him peace—spoke. These men of the roof pass their days in a bitter and wearisome struggle to earn a living and return at the end of the day exhausted and in a hurry to partake of their small pleasures—tasty hot food and a few pipe

of tobacco (or of hashish if they have the money), which they either smoke in a waterpipe on their own or stay up to smoke while talking with the others on the roof on summer nights. The third pleasure is sex, in which the people of the roof revel and which they see nothing wrong with discussing frankly so long as it is of a sort sanctioned by religion. Here there is a contradiction. Any of the men of the roof would be ashamed, like most lower-class people, to mention his wife by name in front of the others, referring to her as “Mother of So-and-so,” or “the kids,” as in “the kids cooked mulukhiya today,” the company understanding that he means his wife. This same man, however, will feel no embarrassment at mentioning, in a gathering of other men, the most precise details of his private relations with his wife, so that the men of the roof come to know almost everything of one another’s sexual activities. As for the women, and without regard for their degree of religiosity or morality, they all love sex enormously and will whisper the secrets of the bed to one another, followed, if they are on their own, by bursts of laughter that are carefree or even obscene. They do not love it simply as a way of quenching lust but because sex, and their husbands’ greed for it, makes them feel that despite all the misery they suffer they are still women, beautiful and desired by their menfolk. At that certain moment when the children are asleep, having had their dinner and given praise to their Lord, and there is enough food in the house to last for a week or more, and there is a little money set aside for emergencies, and the room they all live in is clean and tidy, and the husband has come home on Thursday night in a good mood because of the effect of the hashish and asked for his wife, is it not then her duty to obey his call, after first bathing, prettying herself up, and putting on perfume? Do these brief hours of pleasure not furnish her with proof that her wretched life is somehow, despite everything, blessed with success? It would take a skilled painter to convey to us the expressions on the face of a woman on the roof of a Friday morning, when, after her husband has gone down to perform the prayer and she has washed off the traces of love-making, she emerges to hang out the washed bedding—at that moment, with her wet hair, her flushed complexion, and the serene expression in her eyes, she looks like a rose that, watered with the dew of the morning, has arrived at the peak of its perfection.

The darkness of night was receding, heralding a new morning, and a dim, small light on the roof shone from the window of the room belonging to Shazli the doorkeeper, where his teenage son Taha had spent the night sleepless with anxiety. Now he performed the dawn prayer, plus the two supererogatory prostrations, then sat on the bed in his white gallabiya reading from *The Book of Answered Prayer* and repeating in a frail whisper in the silence of the room, “O God, I ask You for whatever good this day may hold and I take refuge with You from whatever evil it may hold and from any evil I may meet within it. O God, watch over me with Your eye that never sleeps and forgive me through Your power that I perish not; You are my hope. My Lord, Master of Majesty and Bounty, to You I direct my face, so bring Your noble face close to me and receive me with Your unalloyed forgiveness and generosity smiling on me and content with me in Your mercy!”

Taha continued to read the prayers until the light of morning shone into the chamber and little by little life started to stir in the iron rooms—voices, cries, laughter and coughing, doors shutting and opening, and the smell of hot water, tea, coffee, charcoal, and tobacco. For the inhabitants of the roof it was just the start of another day; Taha el Shazli, however, knew that on this day his fate would be decided forever. After a few hours, he would present himself for the character interview at the Police Academy—the last hurdle in the long race of hope. Since childhood, he has dreamed of being a police officer and has devoted all his efforts to realizing that dream. He has applied himself to memorizing

everything for the general secondary examination and as a result obtained a score of 98 percent (Humanities) without private tutoring (apart from a few review groups at the school, for which his father had only just been able to come up with the money). During summer vacations he joined the Abdeen Youth Center (for ten pounds a month) and put up with the exhausting body-building exercises in order to acquire the athletic physique that would allow him to pass the physical fitness tests at the Police Academy.

In order to realize this dream, Taha has courted the police officers in the district until they are all his friends, both those of the Kasr el Nil police station and of the Kotzika substation that belongs to it. From them, Taha has learned all the details relating to the admission tests for the police and found out too about the twenty thousand pounds that the well-to-do pay as a bribe to ensure their children's acceptance into the college (and how he wishes he possessed such a sum!). In order to realize this dream, Taha el Shazli has also put up with the meanness and the arrogance of the building's inhabitants.

Since he was little he had helped his father run errands for people, and when his intelligence and academic excellence manifested themselves, the inhabitants reacted in different ways. Some encouraged him to study, gave him generous gifts, and prophesied a glorious future for him. Others, however (and there were many of these), were somehow disturbed by the idea of "the high-flying doorkeeper's son" and tried to convince his father to enroll him in vocational training as soon as he finished intermediary school "so that he can learn a trade that will be of use to you and to himself," as they would say to elderly "uncle" Shazli, with a show of concern for his welfare. When Taha enrolled in general secondary school and continued to do well, they would send for him on exam days and entrust him with difficult tasks that would take a long time, tipping him generously to tempt him, while concealing a malign desire to keep him from his studies. Taha would accept these tasks because of his need for cash but would go on wearing himself out with study, often going one or two days without sleep.

When the general secondary exam results came out and he obtained a higher score than the children of many in the building, the grumblers started to talk openly. One of them would run into another in front of the elevator and ask him sarcastically if he had offered his congratulations to the doorkeeper on his son's high marks; then he would add bitingly that the doorkeeper's son would soon join the Police Academy and graduate as an officer with two stars on his epaulettes. At this point the other person would candidly reveal his annoyance, first praising Taha's character and his hard work, then going on to say in a serious tone of voice (as though he had the general principle and not the individual in mind) that jobs in the police, the judiciary, and sensitive positions in general should be given only to the children of people who were somebody because the children of doorkeepers, laundrymen, and such like, if they attained any authority, would use it to compensate for the inferiority complexes and other neuroses they had acquired during their early childhood. Then he would bring his speech to an end by cursing Abd el Nasser, who had introduced free education, or quote as authority the saying of the Prophet—God bless him and grant him peace—"Teach not the children of the lowly!"

These same residents started picking on Taha when the results appeared and finding fault with him for the most trivial of reasons, such as washing the car and forgetting to put the floormats back in place, or being a few minutes late in the performance of an errand to somewhere far away, or buying ten things for them from the market and forgetting one. They would insult him deliberately and

unmistakably in order to push him into responding that he would not put up with such insults because he was an educated person, which would be their golden opportunity to announce to him the truth—that here he was a mere doorkeeper, no more and no less, and if he didn't like his job he should leave it to someone who needed it. But Taha never gave them that opportunity. He would meet their outbursts with silence, a bowed head, and a slight smile, his handsome brown face at these moments giving the impression that he did not agree with what was directed at him and that it was entirely in his power to rebut the insult but that respect for the other's greater age prevented him from so doing.

This was one of a number of fall-back positions, tantamount to defensive tactics, that Taha used under difficult circumstances in order to express what he felt while at the same time avoiding problems, positions that had initially been a matter of acting for him but which he soon performed sincerely and as though they were the truth. For example, he did not like to sit on the doorkeeper's bench so that he had to get up respectfully for every resident, and if he was sitting on the bench and he saw a resident coming, he would busy himself with something that would obviate his duty to stand up. Similarly, he was accustomed to addressing the residents with a carefully calculated modicum of respect and to treating them as an employee would his superior and not as a servant his master. As for the children of the residents who were close to him in age, he treated them as complete equals. He would call them by their first names and converse and play around with them like close friends, borrowing from them schoolbooks that he might not actually need in order to remind them that despite his position as a doorkeeper he was their colleague when it came to study.

These were the commonplaces of his day-to-day life—poverty, back-breaking hard work, the arrogance of the residents, and the five-pound note, always folded, that his father bestowed on him every Saturday and on which he practiced every stratagem to make last the whole week; the smooth, warm hand of a resident extended lazily and graciously from a car window to give him a tip (at the sight of which he had to raise his hand in a military-style salute and thank his benefactor enthusiastically and audibly); that look, impertinent and full of smugness or covertly sympathetic and tolerant, inspired by embarrassment at the “issue,” which he noted in the eyes of his school friends when they visited him and discovered that he lived in the doorkeeper's quarters “up on the roof”; that hateful, embarrassing question “Are you the doorkeeper?” that strangers to the building addressed to him; and the deliberate slowing down of the residents as they entered the building so that he would hurry to relieve them of whatever they were carrying no matter how light or unimportant.

It is with annoyances such as these that the day passes, but when Taha gets into bed at the end of the evening, it is always in a state of purity and with his ablutions made, after he has first performed the evening prayer, plus supererogatory odd and even series of prostrations. Then he stares long into the darkness of the room, gradually soaring until he beholds himself in his mind's eye as a police officer strutting proudly in his beautiful uniform with the brass stars gleaming on his shoulder and the impressive government-issue pistol dangling from his belt. He imagines that he has married his sweetheart Busayna el Sayed and that they have moved to a suitable apartment in an up-market district far from the noise and dirt of the roof.

He firmly believed that God would make all his dreams come true—first of all because he made the utmost effort to honor God's commandments, observing the obligatory prayers and avoiding major sins (and God had given to the observant in a noble verse of the Qur'an the good news that *Had the people of the cities believed and been God-fearing, We would have opened upon them blessings from heaven and earth*) and second because he had the highest expectations of God's good intentions (give

that the Almighty and Glorious had said, in words revealed to the Prophet, “I am according to my slaves’ expectations of me: if good, then good, and if bad, then bad”). And see—God had fulfilled his promise and granted him success in the general secondary exams, and he had passed, praise God, all the tests for the Police Academy. All that remained for him to do was the character interview, which he would pass that same day, God willing.

Taha rose and prayed the two morning prostrations, plus two more in supplication for the achievement of his wish, then washed, shaved, and began to get dressed. He had bought a new gray suit, a shining white shirt, and a beautiful blue tie for the character interview, and when he glanced at himself for the last time in the mirror, he looked very smart. As he kissed his mother goodbye, she put her hand on his head muttering an incantation, then started praying for him with an ardor that made his heart pound. In the lobby of the building, he found his father sitting with his legs tucked up under him on the bench as was his habit. The old man rose slowly and looked at Taha for a moment. Then he put his hand on his shoulder and smiled, his white mustache quivering and revealing his toothless mouth, and he said proudly, “Congratulations in advance, Mr. Officer!”

It was past ten o’clock and Suleiman Basha was crowded with cars and pedestrians, and most of the stores had opened their doors. It occurred to Taha that he had a whole hour ahead of him before the exam and he decided that he would take a cab for fear of spoiling his suit on the crowded buses. He wished he could spend the remaining time with Busayna. Their agreed method was that he should pass in front of the Shanan clothing store where she worked; when she saw him she would ask permission from Mr. Talal, the owner, to leave, using the excuse that she had to fetch something or other from the storeroom, and then catch up with him at their favorite place in the new garden in Tawfikiya Square.

Taha did the usual routine and sat there for about a quarter of an hour before Busayna appeared. At the sight of her, he felt his heart beating hard. He loved the way she walked, moving with small, slow steps, looking at the ground, and giving the impression that she was embarrassed or for some reason regretful, or was walking over a fragile surface with extreme care, so as not to break it with her footsteps. Noticing that she was wearing the tight-fitting red dress that revealed the details of her body and whose wide and low-cut front showed her full breasts, he experienced a surge of anger and remembered that he had quarreled with her before in an attempt to make her stop wearing it. However, he suppressed his annoyance, not wishing to spoil the occasion, and she smiled, showing her small, white, regular teeth and the two wonderful dimples on either side of her mouth and lips, which she had painted dark red. She sat down next to him on the low marble garden wall, turned toward him and looked at him, with her wide seemingly astonished honey-colored eyes and said, “What a dandy!”

He answered in an urgent whisper, “I’m going for the character interview now and I wanted to see you.”

“The Lord be with you!” said Busayna with true tenderness. His heart beat hard and at that moment he wished he could clasp her to his chest.

“Are you scared?” she asked.

“I have placed myself in the hands of God, Almighty and Glorious, and whatever Our Lord may do I shall gladly accept, God willing.”

He spoke fast, as though he had prepared the answer ahead of time or as though he were trying to

convince himself with his own words. He was silent for a moment, then went on gently, looking into her eyes, “Pray for me.”

“The Lord grant you success, Taha,” she exclaimed warmly.

Then she went on, as though she thought she had gone too far in showing her feelings, “I have to go now because Mr. Talal is waiting for me.”

As she withdrew, he tried to make her stay, but she put out her hand and shook his, her eyes avoiding him, and said in an ordinary, formal way, “Best of luck.” Later, when he was sitting in the taxi, Taha reflected that Busayna’s attitude toward him had changed and there was no point in ignoring it; that he knew her well and that one look was enough for him to penetrate her innermost thoughts. He had memorized everything about her—her face, whether radiant with happiness or sad, her uncertain smile and the way she blushed when she was embarrassed, her wildcat glances and glowering (but still beautiful) features when she was angry; he even loved to look at her when she had just woken up and the traces of sleep were still on her face, making her look like a compliant, gentle-hearted child.

He loved her and he preserved in his memory the image of her as a little girl when she would play with him on the roof and he would run after her and deliberately hang on to her so that the smell of soap from her hair would tickle his nose; of her as a student at the commercial secondary school wearing the white shirt, blue skirt, and short white school socks above black shoes as she walked hugging her bag as though to hide her ripening bosom; and the beautiful images of them wandering together at the Barrages and the Zoo, and of the day when they revealed their love to each other and agreed to marry and how after that she had clung to him and asked him questions about the details of his life, as though she were his young wife looking after him. They had agreed on everything for the future, even the number of children they would have and their names and what their first apartment would look like.

Then suddenly she had changed. She had become less interested in him and took to talking about “their project” listlessly and sarcastically. She would often quarrel with him and avoid meeting him, using a variety of excuses. This had happened right after her father died. Why had she changed? Was their love just an adolescent thing to be grown out of as they got older? Or had she fallen in love with someone else? This last thought pricked him like a thorn till he bled. He started to picture Mr. Talal the Syrian (owner of the store where she worked) taking her arm in his and wearing a wedding suit.

Taha became aware of a heavy worry weighing on his heart, then awoke from his thoughts as the taxi came to a halt in front of the Police Academy building, which at that moment appeared impressive and historic, as though it were the fortress of fate in which his destiny would be decided. His exam nerves came back to him and he started reciting the Throne Verse in a whisper as he approached the gate.

The information available about Abaskharon in his youth is extremely sparse.

We don’t know what he did before the age of forty or the circumstances in which his right leg was amputated. Everything we know starts with that rainy winter’s day twenty years ago when

Abaskharon arrived at the Yacoubian Building in the black Chevrolet of Madame Sanaa Fanous, a widowed Copt of Upper Egyptian origin, rich, and with two children to whose upbringing she had devoted her life following the death of her husband. Despite her devotion to her children, however, she responded from time to time to the whimsical demands of her body and Zaki el Dessouki had got to know her at the Automobile Club and had been her companion for a while. Much as she enjoyed the relationship, her religious conscience gave her no rest and would often make her break into painful tears as she lay in Zaki's arms after the accomplishment of their pleasure and go and appease her guilt by taking on an abundance of good works through the church. Thus it was that no sooner did Borei, Zaki's former office servant, die than she insisted on his appointing Abaskharon (whose name was on the assistance list at the church), and suddenly there he was, standing hunched up like a mouse and staring at the ground, at his first meeting with Zaki Bey, who was so disappointed at his shabby appearance, his amputated leg, and his crutches, which marked him with the stamp of a beggar, that he said sarcastically to his friend Sanaa in French, "But, my dear, I'm running an office, not a charity!"

She continued trying to win him over with blandishments until in the end he grudgingly agreed to employ Abaskharon, with the idea that he would do what she wanted for a few days then throw him out...but here they were! Abaskharon had demonstrated from the first day an unusual competence: he had an uncommon capacity for uninterrupted, exhausting work and even asked the Bey daily to give him new things to add to his list of duties. He also possessed a sharp intelligence, adroitness, and shrewdness, which made him do the right thing in any given situation and with a capacity for absolute discretion, for he would see and hear nothing of what took place in front of him, be it even murder.

By dint of these great virtues, before a few months had passed Zaki Bey couldn't do without Abaskharon for so much as an hour. He even had a new bell put in the kitchen of the apartment so that he could summon him whenever he needed him, and he gave him a generous salary and allowed him to stay overnight in the office (which was something he hadn't done with anyone before). Abaskharon, for his part had fathomed the Bey's nature from the first day and realized that his master was self-indulgent, a pleasure-seeker, and given to sudden whims and caprices and that his head was rarely free of the effect of narcotics. This sort of man (as per Abaskharon's wide experience of life) was quick to get angry and had a sharp temper but rarely did any harm, and the worst that one was likely to suffer from him was verbal abuse or a dressing down. Abaskharon promised himself that he would never argue with or question his master about what he asked for and that he would always take the initiative in apologizing and ingratiating himself, in order to gain his affection. Likewise he never addressed him by any term other than "Excellency," which he would insert into any sentence he uttered. Thus, if the Bey asked him, for example, "What time is it now?" Abaskharon would reply, "Five o'clock, Excellency."

To tell the truth, Abaskharon's adaptation to his work is somewhat reminiscent of a biological phenomenon. Thus, in the midst of the quiet darkness that reigns over the apartment during the daylight hours and of the ancient musty smell that emanates from the mixing of the scent of old furniture with that of the damp and of the double-strength carbolic acid that the Bey insists be used to clean the bathroom—in this "medium," when Abaskharon emerges from one of the corners of the apartment with his crutches, his ever-dirty gallabiya, his aged hang-dog face, and his ingratiating smile, he seems like a creature functioning effectively in its natural surroundings, like a fish in water or a cockroach in the drain. Indeed whenever for some reason he leaves the Yacoubian Building and walks down the sunny street through the passersby and the noise of the cars, he looks odd and out of place, like a bat in daylight, and his integrity is restored only when he returns to the office where he

has spent two decades concealed in darkness and damp.

We must not, however, be fooled into thinking of Abaskharon as no more than an obedient servant, for the truth is that there is much more to him than that, and behind his servile, weak exterior lies concealed a strong will and precise goals that he will fight courageously and obstinately to achieve. In addition to the raising and educating of his three daughters, he has taken on his shoulders the care of his younger brother Malak and his children too. This gives us the clue to understanding what he does every evening when, alone in his small room, he extracts from the pocket of his gallabiya every coin and small, sweat-soaked, folded banknote, whether obtained directly as tips or that he has succeeded in filching from the purchases for the office. (Abaskharon's brokering methods may be taken as a model of precise, skillful fraud, for he does not, like an amateur, inflate the prices of what he buys, since the prices are known, or may be known, at any moment. Instead he will, for example, filch each day from the coffee, tea, and sugar an amount too small to be noticed, then repackage the stolen provisions in new bags and resell them to Zaki Bey, presenting genuine invoices that he has obtained through a private agreement with the pious, bearded Muslim grocer on Marouf Street.)

In the evening, before retiring to his bed, Abaskharon counts his money twice with care, then pulls out the little blue indelible pencil that he always keeps behind his ear and writes down the balance of his earnings, subtracting from them the amount he is going to save (which he will place in his savings account on Sunday and never thereafter touch), then pay off mentally out of the remainder of what he has received the needs of his large family. And whether he has anything left over after that or not, Abaskharon, the believing Christian, cannot sleep until he has chanted the prayer of thanks to the Lord, his voice reverberating in the silence of the night as he whispers with genuine piety before the figure of the crucified Christ that hangs on the kitchen wall, "because, O Lord, Thou hast fed me and fed my children; thus, I praise You as Your name is glorified in Heaven. Amen."

A word, unavoidably, about Malak.

The fingers of the hand differ from one another in appearance, but all move together in coordination to carry out a given task. Similarly, on the soccer pitch, the mid-field player shoots the ball with the utmost precision to land at the feet of the striker so that he can score a goal. Abaskharon's relationship with his brother Malak was conducted with the same extraordinary harmony.

Malak learned tailoring in shirt-making workshops when he was young; thus domestic service has not left its stamp of abjection upon him, and the fact is his short stature, his cheap, dark-colored "people's suit," his huge belly, and his plump face devoid of any good looks leave a disturbing first impression. However, he hastens to take the initiative with anyone he meets by smiling his broad smile and shaking his hand warmly, talking to him like an old friend and concurring with all his opinions (so long as they do not touch his vital interests), then insistently offering him a Cleopatra cigarette from the wrinkled pack that he carefully extracts from his pocket, checking each time that it is okay, as though it were a jewel. This excessive pleasantness has another side to it, however. If necessary, Malak will switch, in an instant and with the greatest of ease, to the utterly foul language that is to be expected of someone who has received most of his upbringing on the street. Since he combines two opposites—viciousness and cowardice, the violent desire to hurt his opponents and

excessive fear of the consequences—he has become accustomed in his battles to attacking with everything he has. If he finds no resistance, he will go to any lengths in his aggression, without the slightest mercy, as though he doesn't know the meaning of fear. And if he meets with serious resistance from his foe, he will back off immediately without thinking twice. To all these high-level skills of Malak's are added the sagacity and cunning of Abaskharon, so that the two of them work together in perfect coordination and are able, truth to tell, to pull off the most amazing feats.

The two brothers wanted to get a room on the roof, so they had planned and schemed for many months till, on this very day, the hour for action had arrived and no sooner had Rabab entered to see Zaki Bey than Abaskharon, standing in the doorway, bowed and said with a slight, crafty smile, "Excellency. Your permission to run a quick errand?" Before he had finished the sentence, the Bey (who was preoccupied with his girlfriend) had gestured to him to go. Abaskharon closed the door quietly, and his face, as his wooden crutches struck the tiles of the hallway, seemed to change. The servile, ingratiating smile disappeared and a serious, anxious expression appeared in its place. Abaskharon made for the small kitchen that was next to the entrance to the apartment and looked around cautiously. Then he stretched up, leaning on a crutch, until he was able carefully to remove the picture of the Virgin that hung on the wall and behind which was a niche. Sticking his hand into this, he pulled out several large bundles of banknotes, which he set about concealing carefully in his vest and pockets. Then he left the apartment, closing the door gently and firmly behind him. Reaching the entrance of the building, he turned, using his crutch, to the right and approached the doorkeeper's room, from which his brother Malak, who had been waiting for him, quickly emerged. The brothers exchanged a single look of understanding and a few minutes later were making their way down Suleiman Basha on their way to the Automobile Club to meet Fikri Abd el Shaheed, the lawyer who was the agent for the Yacoubian Building.

They had prepared themselves for this meeting and talked it over between themselves for a period of months till there was nothing left to discuss. Thus, they proceeded in silence, though Abaskharon started to mutter prayers to the Virgin and Christ the Savior to grant them success in the mission. Malak, on the other hand, was racking his brains for the most effective words with which to open the conversation with Fikri Bey. He had spent the last weeks gathering information about him and was now aware that the man would do anything for money and that he liked drink and women. He had been to meet him at his office on Kasr el Nil Street and presented him with a gift of a bottle of fine Old Parr whisky before opening the subject of the iron room at the entrance to the roof that had been left empty by the death of Atiya, the newspaper seller, who had lived and died unmarried, his room thus reverting to the owner. Malak had been dreaming of opening this room as a shirt shop ever since he had turned thirty and found himself still a journeyman, moving from store to store as circumstances required. When he broached the topic, Fikri Bey asked for time to think and after much pressure from Malak and his brother had agreed to give it to them in return for the sum of six thousand pounds and not a penny less, and had given them an appointment at the Automobile Club, where he was accustomed to take lunch every Sunday. When the brothers reached the club, Abaskharon felt overwhelmed at the grandness of the place and stared at the real marble that covered the walls and the floor and the luxurious red carpet that extended up to the elevator. Malak seemed to sense this and pressed his arm in encouragement, then advanced and warmly shook hands with the doorman of the club, asking him for Fikri Abd el Shaheed. In preparation for this day, Malak had got to know the workers at the Automobile Club over the past two weeks and gained their friendship with kind, flattering words and a few white gallabiyas that he had presented them as gifts. The waiters and workers hastened therefore to welcome the brothers and led them to the restaurant on the second floor.

where Fikri Bey was taking lunch with a fat white lady friend of his. Naturally, it wouldn't do for the brothers to interrupt the Bey, so they sent someone to him to inform him of their presence and waited for him in a side room.

Only a few minutes passed before Fikri Abd el Shaheed appeared, with his corpulent body, his large bald patch, and his face ruddy and white as a foreigner's; it became immediately obvious from the redness of his eyes and the slight slur in his speech that he had drunk a lot. After the greetings and compliments Abaskharon launched into a long interlude in praise of the Bey, his kind-heartedness, and his similarity in all his doings to Christ. He went on to tell (his brother Malak listening attentively and with affected admiration) how the Bey would exempt many of his clients from the costs of cases if he was sure that they had been wronged and were poor and unable to pay.

“Do you know, Malak, what Fikri Bey says to a poor client if he tries to pay?” Having posed the question, Abaskharon quickly answered it himself. “He says, ‘Go and prostrate yourself in thanks to the Lord Jesus, for He has paid me the fees for your case in full!’” Malak sucked his lips, folded his hands over his protruding stomach, looked at the ground as though completely overcome, and said, “There you see a true Christian!”

Fikri Bey, however, though drunk, was attentive to the way the conversation was going and did not much like its drift; so to bring matters to a head he said in a no-nonsense tone, “Did you bring the money as agreed?”

“Of course, Your Honor,” cried Abaskharon, as he handed him two pieces of paper. “Here's the contract as agreed with Your Honor, and God bless you.”

Then he thrust his hand into his vest to pull out the money. He had brought the agreed-upon six thousand, but had distributed the notes about his person in order to leave himself room for maneuver. He started by pulling out four thousand pounds and held out his hand with these in it to the Bey, who cried out angrily, “What's that? Where's the rest?” At this, the brothers burst out with one voice, as though singing an aria, into a joint plea—Abaskharon in his hoarse, phlegmy, panting tones and Malak in his sharp, high-pitched, loud ones, their words overlapping until they became incomprehensible, though taken as a whole they were intended to awaken the Bey's sympathy by speaking of their poverty and noting that they had, by the Living Christ, gone into debt to get the money and that in all honesty they were unable to pay more than that. Fikri Bey didn't relent for a second. Indeed he got angrier and saying, “This is how children behave! This is no use to me!” he turned around to go back into the restaurant. Abaskharon, however, who had been expecting this move, threw himself so forcefully toward the Bey that he stumbled and was about to fall but with a lightning movement pulled another bundle of notes, worth a thousand pounds, out of the pocket of his gallabiya and thrust it with the other bundles into the pocket of the Bey, who displayed no serious resistance and allowed this to happen. At this Abaskharon was obliged to launch into another interlude of pleading during which he attempted to kiss the Bey's hand more than once and finally brought his ardent importunities to a close with a special move that he kept in reserve for emergencies, suddenly bending his torso backward and pulling his worn, dirty gallabiya upward with both hands so that his truncated leg, attached to the depressingly dark-colored prosthesis, was displayed. In a hoarse, disjointed, voice designed to evoke pity he shouted, “I'm a cripple, sir, and my leg's gone! A cripple with a parcel of children to look after, and Malak has four children and their mother to support! If you love the Lord Christ, sir, don't turn me away brokenhearted!”

This was more than Fikri Bey could withstand and a little while later the three of them were sitting and signing the contract—Fikri Bey, who was furious at what he afterward called, as he recounted what had happened to his lady friend, “moral blackmail,” Malak, who was thinking about the first steps he would take in his new room on the roof and Abaskharon, who kept in place on his face his final, affecting expression (a sad, broken look, as though he had been vanquished and subjected to unbearable burdens); inside, however, he was happy both because the rental contract had been signed and because he had managed with his skill to save a one-thousand-pound bundle, whose delicious warmth he could feel in the right-hand pocket of his gallabiya.

Downtown remained, for at least a hundred years, the commercial and social center of Cairo, where were situated the biggest banks, the foreign companies, the stores, the clinics and the offices of famous doctors and lawyers, the cinemas, and the luxury restaurants. Egypt’s former élite had built the downtown area to be Cairo’s European quarter, to the degree that you would find streets that looked the same as those to be found in any of the capitals of Europe, with the same style of architecture and the same venerable historic veneer. Until the beginning of the 1960s, Downtown retained its pure European stamp and old-timers doubtless can still remember that elegance. It was considered quite inappropriate for natives to wander around in Downtown in their gallabiyas and impossible for them to be allowed in this same traditional dress into restaurants such as Groppi’s, À l’Américaine, and the Odéon, or even the Metro, Saint James, and Radio cinemas, and other places that required their patrons to wear, for men, suits, and, for the ladies, evening dresses. The stores all shut their doors on Sundays, and on the Catholic Christian holidays, such as Christmas and New Year’s, Downtown was decorated all over, as though it were in a foreign capital. The glass frontages scintillated with holiday greetings in French and English, Christmas trees, and figures representing Father Christmas, and the restaurants and bars overflowed with foreigners and aristocrats who celebrated with drinking, singing, and dancing.

Downtown had always been full of small bars where people could take a few glasses and tasty dishes of *hors d’œuvres* in their free time and on weekends at a reasonable price. In the thirties and forties, some bars offered in addition to the drinks small entertainments by a Greek or Italian musician or a troupe of foreign Jewish women dancers. Up to the end of the 1960s, there were on Suleiman Basha alone almost ten small bars. Then came the 1970s, and the downtown area started gradually to lose its importance, the heart of Cairo moving to where the new élite lived, in El Mohandiseen and Medinet Nasr. An inexorable wave of religiosity swept Egyptian society and it became no longer socially acceptable to drink alcohol. Successive Egyptian governments bowed to the religious pressure (and perhaps attempted to outbid politically the opposition Islamist current) by restricting the sale of alcohol to the major hotels and restaurants and stopped issuing licenses for new bars; if the owner of a bar (usually a foreigner) died, the government would cancel the bar’s license and require the heirs to change the nature of their business. On top of all this there were constant police raids on bars, during which the officers would frisk the patrons, inspect their identity cards, and sometimes accompany them to the police station for interrogation.

Thus it was that as the 1980s dawned, there remained in the whole of Downtown only a few, scattered, small bars, whose owners had been able to hang on in the face of the rising tide of religion and government persecution. This they had been able to do by one of two methods—concealment or bribery. There was not one bar downtown that advertised its presence. Indeed, the very word “Bar” on the signs was changed to “Restaurant” or “Coffee Shop,” and the owners of bars and wine stores

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