Armen Dadour

Tales of the Nile

"Let knowledge grow from more to more
but more of reverence in us dwell."

Lord Alfred Tennyson

The Nile

"Whether the visitor walks its bleak banks in far-off Nubia or looks down upon its swift-flowing waters, crowded bridges and roaring corniche traffic from a hotel balcony in Cairo, the Nile is always there, a presence sometimes insistent, sometimes subtle, constant in the mind and being. It is the ***Ka of Egypt,*** *that elusive other-soul of the Ancients, as alive for native and tourist now as it was for them."*

Egypt the Eternal Smile, by Allen Drury

Armen Dadour

TALES OF THE NILE

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In loving memory of my wife Vartouhy "Rose" Dadour, educator, known as "Mrs. Dadour" to several generations of students in Egypt and the United States, I dedicate these *Tales of the Nile.*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

In 1971, I had the honor and pleasure to meet in person the eminent Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, now a Nobel Laureate of Literature, in his Cairo office suite to present him with a copy of my selected short stories and essays in Armenian.

Mr. Mahfouz graciously suggested that I render some of my tales to English so that they would be accessible to all.

I took his advice seriously and today eleven of my stories appear in *Tales of the Nile*.

Tales of the Nile covers the years from the early thirties to the mid fifties.

Egyptian life has greatly changed since then except for the kindness of the Egyptian people.

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JEMEELA

"What's for lunch today?" asked Salma to her fisher husband.

"Fish."

"Nile fish?"

"So what? We'll have lunch, right?"

"Yes, Soliman!"

"Wonderful! We've lots of frozen fish."

"Where do they get it from? Could Khalifa become sick when he sucks my breast?"

"Don't you start again, early this morning! The frozen is as good as our Nile *Bolti*. The frozen is from the Red Sea."

"Is it red?"

"The sea or the fish?"

"The fish."

"Color is no problem when fish tastes good and fills the stomach."

"Right! Let's start in Allah's name."

This is how they spoke, man and wife, early in the morning, before fishing on the Nile.

If the catch was good and they sold it, then they could buy food and live for a few days. On that day they would eat frozen fish from the Red Sea, plenty and cheap.

Whatever quantity they caught, as was the case with other fishermen, the catch was never enough to feed Cairo's huge population.

A few days ago Soliman had walked through nearby streets praising loudly his catch. He sold fresh Nile fish in a basket woven with palm leaves, a bamboo cane passing through the rings and held on his shoulder; also fish stuffed in his loose upper gown like a bag secured at his waist with a cord.

Those who bought fish were simple people living in basements: doorkeepers, cooks, and men who press gowns and shirts by hand or foot. They heard Soliman's voice. The well to do did not, though they had ears too!

There, on the eternal River Nile, is floating Soliman's little barge which has the shape of the dark eyes of an Egyptian beauty queen.

The fisherman crouching on his heels at the barge's edge, barely a foot high from the water, drops the net into the river with regular motions of his hands. His wife sitting in the midboat, is rowing with great skill. She knows when to move or keep in place the barge by following her husband's actions. Under its apparent calm and quiet look, the Nile is formidable in power, which overcomes any obstacle on its way to the open sea. To keep moving against the current is very energy consuming to the man and his wife who have a newborn baby.

Salma's palms are rough with corns. Her legs, hands, neck, and face have turned black from long hours of exposure to the sun, so they get no burns anymore. She has applied black kohl to her eyelids to protect them from the searing sun. Salma has no home on firm land. The barge is her floating house, her cupboard, her bed, and her pillow on the Nile: a real house built on firm foundations.

Salma is barely twenty. She keeps her long braids under her black scarf. Her black gown makes her look older. Constant exercise keeps her statuesque body beautiful.

Whenever she sets foot on the river-bank, only then does she find the earth flat and motionless. While floating on the River Nile, the world passes by Salma: the bridges, the houses, even the feluccas, and the yachts. She always watches her husband anxiously:

"A few big catches to sell," she tells herself, "and we'll have lunch with the money."

The man casts his net and pulls out trifles.

"Dearest," says Soliman at last, "let's try our luck under the Freedom Bridge!"

He hurries and sits next to her. Each holds an oar, rowing against the current to reach a place full of fish along the Rhoda Islands. Both join forces whenever they row the boat against the current. This is what the Nile has taught them.

For some time Khalifa is quiet. His mother is worried: "What's wrong with him? Why doesn't he cry?" All of a sudden she hears his voice. She is happy.

"Quiet!" says Salma to the baby wrapped in rags and hidden at the bottom of the boat. She knows the child is hungry. It doesn't matter. She cannot, like any other mother, take the child into her arms, press him to her breast, kiss and take out her teat, and feed him milk.

"Quiet! Quiet!," which sounds like a lullaby on the boat in constant motion. The entire family is floating: a black almond-shaped eye looking at the heavens, but who gets bread from the earth. The muddy but sweet waters of the River Nile!

"Quiet, quiet. Wait my little baby!"

"Khalifa is hungry, woman!"

"Good. Let him cry!"

"He'll chase away the fish with his shrill voice," says Soliman jokingly, "feed him!"

"Remember the day he was born?"

"Yes, yes. We caught a fish larger than Khalifa."

"He's lucky!"

Soliman has a soft heart. He cannot bear to hear any child crying. How often has he not left everything including boat, fish, net, plunged into the river, summer-winter and saved young men, teenagers, and kids, expecting nothing in return.

"Quiet! Quiet!"

"Not good enough to feed him!"

"Don't worry, he will grow up, cry or no cry."

Soliman does not agree. "Let him have milk first, learn to laugh, then cry as much as he wants. Feed first the crying kid."

Soliman takes the oars into his strong hands and rows against the current. The child, starved, sucks his mother's milk. He is full now and silent. Both parents are happy.

They reach Rhoda Island, rich in reeds. Salma returns the baby to the crib at the bottom of the boat and takes the oars. Soliman hurries to the tail end of the boat and throws the net into the water. The wife keeps in tune with the boat's movement, rowing with skill. The man silently admires her instinctive rowing ability, yet his manly pride does not let him say a word. Isn't she carpenter Hafez's daughter who he married and became partners in work and life? It's another thing when it comes to fishing: every fisherman leaves his wife and child at home while seafaring. Not so with the Nile. The River does not disrupt the family: father and son, husband and wife. Calm is the River in spite of its tremendous strength. Isn't this proof of being great? We have a kid who will grow up and even before walking and rowing, will swim, said Soliman to himself.

Prior to closing the net, Soliman stood up, and with a piece of rope attached to a wooden ball at its end started beat-

ing the river surface in order to gather fish into the net as a shepherd does to his flock of sheep.

The net closed. Soliman started pulling, hoping, and praying that the boat will be filled up with fish, Allah willing! Eager and careful, he held his breath and pulled up the net with regular rhythm. Even before the net was out, Soliman could assess the content.

That morning he netted a rusty tin, a piece of rag, and a broken bottle. He skillfully shook off the net out of the reeds to start all over again, not a single fish until noon but lots of small fry. He did not like small fry. As soon as he caught one, he would let it go.

"Let it grow up!"

"Why give away your luck?" says Salma.

"Don't worry! The fry will pray for us," says Soliman. "Do someone good, throw it into the Nile, and forget about it!"

The sun was now above their heads. Soliman knew the kid was hungry and Salma must have lunch to breastfeed their son. In the boat they had dry pita bread, which they could soak in the River and eat with green onions they bought from Giza and the aged cheese they kept in a clay jar. The previous day they had lunched also on pita bread, onion, and cheese.

The boat had barely touched the river-bank when Soliman gathered some dry branches, looked at Salma who was kissing Khalifa tenderly and had already put her teat into the little mouth of her baby.

All three were now floating on the Nile: Salma, Khalifa, and the boat "Jemeela," which means Beauty.

Soliman admired the beauty of his wife and her motherhood. He and Salma often would take a plunge into the river. They would also wash and clean "Jemeela." Only Khalifa did

not bathe in the Nile though water was plentiful; Salma was afraid her child would catch cold. She wiped and cleaned his body, hiding him away from the evil eyes she feared so much and was glad the Nile kept the baby aloof of jealous stares!

"Let me go to the market, fetch some fish and broil it," says Soliman. "Plenty of it in the Nile! The whole world can be fed with our fish, some day, but I don't know when."

And "Jemeela" kept on floating...

THE SINGING BOY

"O rose of love: pure, innocent!" would sing the boy.

I used to see him daily on my way to Cairo and back to Zagazig, a town in Lower Egypt. At daybreak I took the train—a mere hour's journey to my workplace—and came back home the very same afternoon.

He was slender, with golden hair and dreamy eyes. He looked tired, overworked. He wore short loose pants, a thin old shirt, and a black necktie. But the wrinkles on his pale face had nothing to do with age; he looked old, yet was a mere lad of perhaps ten.

The first time I saw him one winter morning when he entered our carriage, shivering and cold, I mistook him for a common pedlar. In an instant the boy jumped onto a seat and announced his presence with a tambourine in his hand.

"*Salam,* greetings!"

Behind him came a thin, tall man with a stern look, unkempt, unshaven, wearing a dirty black overcoat, and a red fez atop his head. Without losing an instant, he leaned against the door, took out of his pocket a flute made from Nile-reed and accompanied the boy who started singing "Tears of Love," the popular Egyptian song of the day.

His voice was beautiful. Hurriedly he concluded his concert with a single song, took out of his pocket a red kerchief, unfolded it and on the palm of his shivering thin hand, walked seriously and silently along the rows of passengers. He then

handed over the coins collected to the man with the flute, who instantly put the money into his coat pocket, and gave back the kerchief.

From one carriage to another: "O rose of love: pure, innocent!"

Morning, noon, and evening the boy gave his concert in soprano, forming a symphony with the tambourine, the flute, and the tack-tack beat of wheels.

Even before sunset, the accompanist was out of breath and the flute silent. Then the boy sang solo. Passengers sat forward to listen to this born artist. Surely he would be a great singer some day. Even the Inspector ignored the presence of the musicians without tickets and pretended not to see them.

But the boy sang without any feeling and inspiration, jumping from carriage to carriage, going from train to train, morning, noon, evening—in a senseless, endless journey, trying to reach with his song everyone without any exception; equally to those who paid or not, without even uttering a word of thanks.

"O rose of love: pure, innocent!"

I heard the song in every train I took. I met the singing boy and his guardian who pocketed the money and gave the empty kerchief back to the boy.

The sight of the pair began disturbing me. Early morning the boy already looked tired, unwilling to sing, as if under a charm, in silent protest against the flute player, the entire world. And when the pair left for the next carriage, I took a deep breath of relief.

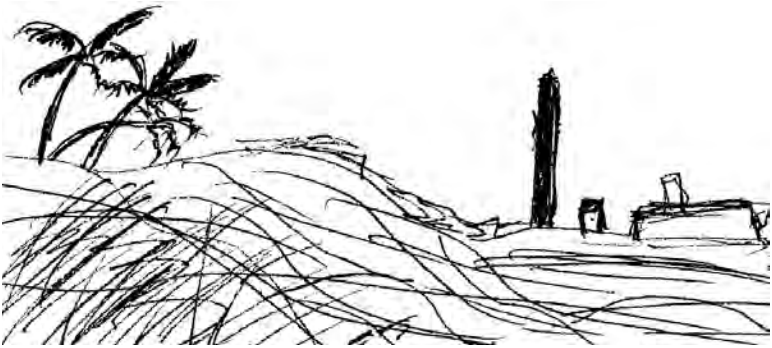
One evening I came home late. "A train accident," I was told.

No more, "O rose of love: pure, innocent."

The following morning, noon, and evening, and all the other days the same sharp whistle of the train, same "tack-tack" beat of the carriage wheels. Not anymore the "O rose..." love song. The boy was nowhere to be seen. No one cared where he had gone, or what became of him.

The passengers would no longer have to drop a few piasters into the kerchief. The moment I saw the Inspector, I asked him about the singing boy. The man shook his head.

Yes! It was the singer, a true artist, unable to make his song reach the world full of din and turmoil.



THE COTTON WORM

Nearby the Sakkara pyramid, Egyptian fellah (peasant) Saad's eldest of seven children, Omar, was trying with reed and hook to catch fish from the canal branch of the River Nile.

Saad was worried how he could make a man out of Omar.

"Our other boys and girls help us, carry water from the canal, feed the fowl, milk the cow, and I am glad," he would say to Samira, his wife. "As for Omar, I don't know what will become of him."

"Man," would say Samira, "he's so young yet. Patience! Allah is with those who are patient."

Saad, after a day's hard work, was sitting on the ground with his back to the hut he had built of clay-mud, and smoking the *sheeshah* (hubble-bubble) he loved so much. He was born at the farm, had worked there all his life for the Landowner.

When still a child Saad had started picking up cotton worms with Samira, then collected cotton that turned into gold and went into the Bey's pocket. Saad hoped the world would change one day. He smoked and watched lovingly the land that had absorbed so much blood and sweat of his forefathers and of himself, always for some other person.

It was evening. Samira was burning sun-dried cow dung, cooking *mulukheeyah* (vegetable soup) for dinner. The family would dine and then, exhausted, sleep all in a single room on a straw mat spread on bare earth.

"He's so young yet! Did I hear you say it, when younger ones gather cotton worms and get two piasters a day?"

"Remember: Omar catches fish for us to eat. Do what you want."

"Time will do it. Everything will settle in time," said Saad with the optimism of the fellah. "Patience is wonderful!" The good earth had taught him so. With patience did sprout the seed, tasted sweet the red date.

He drew a deep breath from the *goza* he had made out of a coconut shell and reed. He would raise Omar differently from his other children, yet he did not know how.

The Bey came once a week to inspect his vast farmland and make sure everything was in order and proceeding according to his instructions. He stopped his car at the border line, signalled and called any villager, and asked for the *rayeess* (supervisor) who updated the Bey on the crop situation, work done by the peasants, and left out any mention of the unfavorable.

A famous trial lawyer of tremendous wealth, the Bey kept for himself the prime roast beef. The leftovers went to the fellah. The Bey had thrown out whoever "Endangered public safety." And the poor fellah, until he could prove his innocence, was in ruins.

The Bey did not want to have any problem or headache. A man of great influence, he arranged everything to his favor. People knew this well and did not even dare to cause trouble. They were sure someday they would be the masters of the land they toil on and till. It was a matter of time. The Bey pretended to show interest in fellah's living conditions. He would barely stay half an hour at his farmland and remain seated in his car, so as to keep his shoes clean.

That afternoon, from the car horn, Omar knew the Bey was coming: "Let others run and alert the *rayeess*. Today I must catch catfish and take it home. Since our *Bairam* feast, we have had neither meat nor fish for dinner. I promised my mother...." Then all of a sudden: "Allah, I've got it!" he exclaimed in great joy and pulled up his fishing reed. It was a big *bolti* (Nile fish) struggling to free itself off the hook.

The master's car stopped just behind Omar. The boy was putting his catch into the basket he had woven of palm leaves.

"Hey, you, I am talking to you!"

It was the Bey's voice all right! His Excellency always commanded respect to the old and young, kid or grown up. Allah above in Heavens, His Excellency the Bey on Earth!

Omar immediately dropped the fish into the basket, pretending to clean his hands by wiping them on his gown and jumped close to the car.

"Yes, Your Excellency!"

He had learned he should address the master in these words.

"What's your name? What are you doing here?" asked the Bey with the severity of having caught one red-handed.

"Omar, son of Saad: catching fish, Bey Excellency!"

"Why are you NOT picking up cotton worms?"

"Because, Bey Excellency, we're having fish for dinner," said Omar.

The Bey did not like this daring answer. The trap was set ready: he would take the boy and punish him to show that nobody is exception to the law. He alone was the Law and would crush this parasite like a worm, under his heels.

The cotton worm was inexorably devouring Bey's wealth and threatening to destroy the cotton crop! This boy could

become a bad example to others in the village if left unpunished. It was imperative to chastise the runaway.

"You'll eat fish and let the worms eat my cotton crop? Scram, call the *rayeess,* you dog!"

"Yes, Bey Excellency," said Omar, terrified, and ran home.

Through the cotton field came the *rayeess* who in a couple of minutes was at the Bey's side.

"Welcome, Bey Excellency!"

"How's the situation?"

"Good, getting better every day. We have done most of the work. Only a little strip remains to be cleared."

"We have also to clean up the rest of the worms."

"With Allah's will, we shall, Bey Excellency."

"Have you put to work everyone in the village?"

"Yes, Bey Excellency! All of us do work hard, including every boy and girl."

"You are lying, *rayeess,* lying! Take a look at the basket and tell me what's inside!"

He made his hunt with a sting.

Rayeess ground his teeth and cursed through them with a low voice: "You've ruined me, little devil, Omar!"

"What do you see inside the basket?" repeated the Bey sternly.

"Fish, Bey Excellency."

"And what should have been the contents, Your Honor, *rayeess?*"

"Worms, Bey Excellency!"

"You know why? Because 'All of us do work hard, including every boy and girl,' isn't that so?"

The *rayeess* turned red, because the Bey sitting in his car, knew only to give orders.

The supervisor knew well Saad and the family. Every member was trying hard to save the cotton crop. Saad was doing his very best to feed the family of seven. Rayeess knew the fish would help nourish when there was not enough food for all of them. Rayeess himself had done some fishing at this very spot and was aware how happy must be little Omar. But it was another story when the Bey was present.

"By Allah, I swear in the name of the Prophet, Bey Excellency, that the entire village works, collects worms for the prosperity of Your Excellency! This kid, Omar, is the naughty son of our good and faithful Saad. Skips work, comes here. I have spoken to his father a thousand times, in vain. While working in the field, Omar goes and disappears suddenly. But I know where to look for this devil of a boy. And I was on my way here, Bey Excellency, when fortunately I saw you."

"Is that so? Of course, wonderful!" said the Bey. He shouted to the point of bursting: "Throw into the river fish and basket and bring here the creature called Saad and his pup; find them wherever they are!"

"Right now, Bey Excellency!"

The *rayeess,* with a broken heart, threw away fish and basket into the canal and made it clear and audible to the Bey the words: "Damn you, Omar!"

The supervisor was worried the way the Bey would punish Saad, that good and faithful fellah! Would he be fired together with members of his family? If Saad lost his job, what would he do, where would he go, how would he feed so many mouths, where the devil did the Bey come from? What a monster! Who knows what other mischief is in his wicked heart!

The moment *rayeess* turned to go, an evil and sarcastic smile appeared on the Bey's face. "Instead of fish, I'll feed you

with worms and the worms will devour you, useless people!"

In his dark mind he conceived a bright idea: "Wonderful, wonderful!" he exclaimed.

The Bey remembered that his wife had asked him to bring along a trustworthy lad from the farm to work as a servant, sleep in the balcony or outside on the steps, and run errands all day long. He would do the shopping, wash the dishes, and clean the mansion. The ones that were hired through agents had found life unbearable and left. "The boy's father is in my hands, the boy can neither escape nor grumble. Today I'll take Omar with me," he thought.

After a while came Saad with *rayeess* holding Omar's hand.

"Bey Excellency! Omar has come to ask your forgiveness. And his father promises that the boy will never do fishing again!"

"Kiss the Bey's hand, you good-for-nothing," said Saad.

"It was nothing serious," said the Bey, surprising those present.

Actually he feared the boy's kiss would soil his hand and he continued faking indulgence: "I'll take you to Cairo. You'll live in our mansion, will help the lady, wash the car, and go about the town with us. Do you know how to pick up good fruits, son?"

Saad did not believe what he heard. His Excellency would take Omar with him to his mansion in Cairo, where the kid would live, learn, be educated, and eat food he never tasted before. How noble of the Bey!

"Sure, Bey Excellency," answered the naive fellah. "He's devil of a boy! Let him learn and become a man—due to your kindness. It's an excellent opportunity for him."

"If he can see it," said *rayeess*. "One cannot dream of a greater kindness: to live in Cairo, what luck!"

Omar was astonished and shut his mouth. What did they want of him? Is it a crime to fish? Where is the one he caught? But he wanted also to see Cairo, sit in the beautiful car. Once he had caressed its shining mud-guard, and the Bey had shouted at him, "Get lost, dog! Don't you ever touch it!" Since then he had not dared to get near the car.

"Take Omar with you, Sir. I commend him." And looking at Saad, asked: "You agree with me, don't you?"

The fellah who did not want to send so suddenly his son away, without letting him first take a small bag full of pita bread and *meesh* (aged cheese) to eat on the way, but he could not speak his mind and said: "Of course, of course!"

"Come in, son," said the Bey. "We are late!"

A narrow dirt road led to the city; on one side were the green ribbon of cotton fields, the desert, and the Sakkara Pyramid, then the canal about thirty-feet wide. On the opposite bank, again, cotton fields: all the Bey's property.

Omar kissed his father's hand, said good-bye to the *rayeess,* opened the car door, and jumped in.

The *rayeess* and the farmer gave a salute with the words, "May Allah speed" and were happy to be with no further trouble. The Bey started the engine and made a sharp turn. The car plunged directly into the canal and disappeared in an instant!

The *rayeess* and Saad watched in terror and instantly jumped into the water.

Every one in the village had been one time or other in the river, swimming. The villagers took their baths in the canal; women and young girls took shelter behind the Nile reeds,

away from the eyes and ears of the curious naughty boys and teenagers.

Rayeess and Saad dived into the muddy waters, found the car, opened its door, pulled out the Bey and laid him on the bank. The supervisor tried to press the water out of the Bey's body. Meanwhile, Saad jumped again into the canal: "The current must have driven my son down the river," he thought, and started in panic to look for Omar who was nowhere to be found.

At the riverside, a throng gathered; they urged Saad to come out of the water. Finally he did so and could not believe his eyes. Omar was standing in front of the crowd!

"Daddy! Daddy!"

They embraced each other. Saad was extremely moved and shaking, and could barely utter: "What happened?"

"I swam, came out of the water, ran to the village, and called for help," he said.

"Thanks to Allah," said his father. "You are alive!"

The two ran to help the Bey. Omar was impatient to see the villagers pull the car out from the water, and revive the Bey quickly so that both would be on their way to Cairo.

Rayeess was trying hard to revive His Excellency who with bloated belly, seemed to be sleeping in peace and would not get up. The Bey was lying at the feet of his subjects. The sight of him in that position, astonished Omar. He had never seen a drowned person before, was sure if the Bey opened his eyes, he would shout and chase away the curious. Few ever had the chance to see him from so near.

Hired women mourners came and according to ancient Egyptian custom, screamed, raised shrill cries, and mentioned Bey's name with: "O our Master, our Glory, our Source of

Bread! O Allah, receive the Bey into Paradise!" Then they rubbed their faces with mud from the canal as a sign of mourning. Only there were no tears in their eyes.

During the turmoil, the Red Crescent Emergency van and the Police rushed to the scene. Officers examined the lifeless body and made sure the Bey was victim of an accident, and that the *rayeess* and Saad had indeed tried hard to save the Bey. They also noted Omar's testimony.

While the Bey's body was being placed in the emergency van, Omar held fast his dad's large strong and rough hand, put for a moment his face on it, glad that he would be returning home again to his loved ones and the following day would again catch fish: a big *bolti,* may be!

He well knew that the Bey would never come back again.

"Let's go," said *rayeess* to the crowd, "The Written has been Done." The Bey's life would end this way and it did!

"Am not worried a jot," said Saad to himself. "My kid CAN swim!"

A MATTER OF LUCK

The end section of Cairo's well-known Soliman Street, up to the Tahrir (Liberation) Square, is the business domain of the Fadel family who have made their home the corner of an alley and lived there, away from inquisitive eyes and ears: Fadel, his wife, and five underage kids.

Fadel knows not what a star or crescent is like, and does not gaze at the Heavens. How could he, when he does not see? He is blind, loves his wife Kareema and the children. He feels the warmth of the sun even at dusk, when the hard stone sidewalk is still tepid. He knows the living are born, grow up, as he and his wife have, same as the passersby. Wherever born, man lives. He who is born can live on bread, grow somehow, and become a man. Most important of all is to be member of a large family.

Fadel was not born blind. Smallpox had left him sightless. Fadel knows too well what it means to have an empty or a full stomach; the scorching sun, dry and bitter cold of the night plague him. He is aware of the fact that without hard work nobody gives a chip away. He is not a beggar.

He sells Luck. He has no idea what it is like, what form and shape is the thing called Luck. Does it exist or if it's an illusion, a hoax?

Sitting on a hard straw mat, Fadel conducts business, sells lottery tickets, and provides food for his family. With a few piasters he orders a plateful of beans or lentil soup in which

family members soak bread, have their fill, and praise Allah.

Why are the Fadels there, where have they come from, all of a sudden? Nobody asks or cares. You may think they have grown up like weeds out of the sidewalk or are a heap of basalt bits left there.

Bread is Fadel's main concern: neither having a house, clothing, nor a plateful of beans or lentils, as vital as delicious pita bread and a pitcherful of Nile water to fill the stomach. Also pillow and mattress are not as important to the Fadels who feel the world is basalt-hard and tough. It's a matter of habit, as walking barefoot. The kids' soles are tough and can withstand the hard and burning sidewalk, as they do not wear down as shoes do.

Kareema has a baby in her arms and a sixth is about ready to see the light, eager to occupy the space on the stone sidewalk; a bundle wrapped in rags. The other four—one girl and three boys—run all day long and evening, sometimes up to late night believing they are playing not just any game, but one of Luck! And the game? By all means to sell a Lottery ticket to passers-by, run back, give the money to Daddy, and get another ticket. The one that sells the most has his due reward: a piece of candy.

Five Egyptian pounds is Fadel's entire capital. They live on it; he, Kareema, and the five kids—also the one arriving to see the world. Five pounds of paper money that does not melt, burn, or perish on the stone pavement, because family members have mixed their sweat, hope, dreams, and yes, their lives with the money which, if lost, the Fadels would not be living. If multiplied by a miracle, they would move away from the sidewalk! And all this with the help of the Lotto, which in its

mysterious numerical figures keeps the secret of Luck within and leads one to believe that each ticket can present one with five hundred Egyptian pounds and save the winner from his worries.

Fadel's only source of income is from the sale of lottery tickets, leaving him a profit of fifty piasters—half a pound: trying to live with it on the sidewalk, with a wife and five children. Oh, and one more, waiting to see the light of the world and the world of light.

Each with a lottery ticket, the Fadel kids hurry on Soliman Street sidewalk.

They know by heart its concrete, slab by slab, even the broken and the loose ones. If the kids wait with their backs to the wall, nobody bothers to buy a Lotto ticket. They must sell it, must cry and stick if need be, with: "Sir, Ma'm, please take this ticket. You'll win the First Prize, five hundred Egyptian pounds!"

"Don't want it."

"May Allah protect your kid; it's the last ticket I have."

"*Yalla,* go. I don't want it!"

"It's the last one I have. Five hundred pounds, you'll win, for sure!"

"Scram! You hear me?"

"I beg you, Sir, Ma'm, Miss: May Allah give you long life. Dad'll beat me if I don't sell this ticket!"

And the pitiful waif begins to cry with real tears, knowing how to produce plenty of tears. The passerby gives in. A voice within urges the purchaser to take the lottery ticket. Luck in the form of the street lad, smiles through the tears, wants him to win the First Prize!

"Let me have!"

"May Allah give you long life, keep your children..."

Holding firmly the five piasters, the kid is happy and runs back to his mother: "Sold!"

"Good work! Let me have the money."

She takes it and makes sure it is not forged: "Give it to Daddy."

Fadel takes the coin, feels it, puts it in his pocket, and gives a new ticket: "Now sell this one. Don't play on the way, understand?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Keep open your eyes!"

"Yes, Daddy," and runs with the ticket.

Then the next kid comes back: same picture, same words.

Fadel takes a deep breath and smiles: "Clever li'll ones! Sure will never go hungry. Know how to make their livin', Kareema!"

"They're doin'it for candy's sake. Let's give each one a piece."

Fadel agrees, but is silent. He is thinking: "What's to become of us; me, my wife, and kids? They are growin' up, and both of us growin' old. Don't want these kids to become beggars or pickpockets, and rob money from people. I want them to go to school, learn a trade, work, and be men!"

"What if we win the first prize, Kareema?"

"And leave for good this damn sidewalk, the street, this way of life!"

"Right. But first, we must have Luck!"

"Is there somethin' called 'Luck'?"

"Sure, must be! Why then you think we're sellin' Lotto?"

From then on, Fadel for his own future and that of his kids, every day keeps in his pocket a ticket.

"We'll do it even if we make less money."

"No harm tryin'," said Kareema.

The kids run back and forth, one after the other, like busy bees, give the coins and have sweets. They also gain the favor to dip more bread into the soup bowl. It's not so hard to sell ninety- nine Lottos a day to enable the Fadels to make their living.

"O Lord, five hundred pounds only, grant us the First Prize! You well see our lot, where we live, what we eat. Have mercy on us, our kids and let Luck be with us, O Lord, most Just, Almighty! I'll glorify You, spit on this stone pavement, burn these rags and the straw mat and buy a prayer rug. I'll take Kareema, and my kids, and rent a room on the spot for all of us. I'll do the ceremonial washin' and pray on my new rug. I'll buy several soft cotton mattresses so all of us will sleep on them, under comforters, with full stomach, O Lord!"

After this silent prayer, Fadel starts to believe in his blind Luck the way his kids were making a passerby believe in it.

"We'll win," Fadel keeps saying all day long. "We'll win the First Prize, Allah willin'!"

"Yes," repeats Kareema: "He's the One Who Grants: The Righteous, The Giver!"

Every day until late night, in Soliman Street, the Fadel kids, bold and brave, keep going after the passersby, promising Luck and Wealth. Every hour of the day, thousands upon thousands pass by Soliman Street. Thousands and thousands of pounds flow into the high fashion shops along the avenue and at most a trickle reaches Fadel and his kids. And every day Fadel implores Heavens, The Merciful, The Almighty to have pity on him, on Kareema and their innocent children and *let them* have the First Prize. Just for once!

Months pass by. One day Fadel decides not to keep any Lotto for himself and gives away the last one to his elder son to sell. Ali is clever, more so than the others. He can sell a ticket any time, day or night.

Ali runs and very soon comes back with the money.

"Bravo!" says his father.

Next day a stranger comes with Ali and asks: "Are you this kid's father?"

Fadel fears for a moment, suspects a Secret Agent has come to take away Ali.

"Why that question? What is it you want?"

"Nothing, nothing really! My mistake may be! I want to make sure..."

"Sure of what?"

"Nothing, nothing really!"

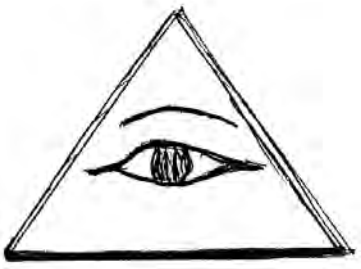
"Something not worth mentioning?"

"Yes!" And the man takes out of his pocket a five pound note: "This is my *baksheesh* (tip) for you."

"But why?" asks Fadel taken by surprise.

"Nothing, nothing really!" says the gentleman with the disappointment of one who hates stooping to pick up a worthless coin from the ground, and adds:

"I just won the First Prize. Five hundred pounds!"



THE PRINTING PRESS

It is pitchdark in the outskirts of the Old City. Here and there through the cracks of a closed front door or the wood-shutters of a dilapidated house, beams of light cut like a knife the thick black night. The City Quarter is sound asleep, worn out, and exhausted. At that late hour, the only light of the narrow and dusty alleys comes from the workshops, which are officially "Closed." Hidden away in a far corner of the City, large spaces are cheaply rented by people who have found a gold mine doing business there.

The printing houses are very busy shipping volumes of books to libraries and schools. The gold bearing vein is at the press, which turns out so much print with so few people.

The boy of ten, bare feet, pale in the face, a bagful of bones, a piece of yellow parchment deprived of sunlight and play, is working in front of the printer, standing from morning to night. The steel does not grant respite to him. He feeds paper to the voracious but gentle Giant, which grinds like a mill and provides bread for the minds of students, but the kid does not get even a crumb. He is burning, wasting away spreading light.

His name is Abd-el-Noor, the Servant of Light. In fact he is doing just that.

The kid has two sisters and two brothers, all his juniors who need bread, as do his father and mother. His father, a kind man but weak, works part-time, sells home made yogurt in a

tray on his shoulders. The mother locks the children in the single room they occupy and goes to work. This way the combined efforts of three keep the family alive. In a red kerchief, Abd-el-Noor carries his lunch and dinner: two loaves of bread and a bit of cheese. He does not have any meat, milk, and fruits to eat. Camel meat he eats only once on the *Bairam* feast. Each morning the family has fava beans for breakfast.

Life for Abd-el-Noor comprises countless hours and endless minutes; he has no idea how long he must work or take his lunch break.

The kid has lost all sense of time and is busy feeding the voracious printing Giant with sheet paper, one after the other from the huge heap around him. The monotonous movements amount to immobility and make him sleepy. He is sort of a machine: leaves home daily for work and back. On weekends, he cleans the printer, when his entire body is in dirt!

Whenever the supervisor wants to send him home, with: "*Yalla!* Off with you, enough for today!"

"Li'll more, Sir!"

"Scram; home!"

Though harsh speaking, the supervisor is a man of soft heart, father of six. By years of hard work, he has risen to that position. Above all, he wants discipline to get results. He is strict and adheres to the letter of the Workers' Law. He is standing tall next to the kid.

Abd-el-Noor wants to work more, until midnight, to have the strength to carry on working for the good of the family. Also he knows he is not wasting away his life in vain, that the books are to be read by many, luckier than he; they will learn nice things and some day, may be one of the boys will come and talk about the things he learned.

Abd-el-Noor carries on printing, pays no attention to the chief.

"I said, scram!"

"One more hour, Sir!"

A strong slap on the face and the kid stopped printing.

"Be off !"

Then reasons softly: "By Law, only eight hours. No more. See you tomorrow morning!"

"Yes Sir!" says the boy, and rubs his face, which bears the red mark of five fingers.

"I'll make a man out of you!" says the supervisor.

The boy takes his empty red kerchief, wraps it around his neck, and disappears in the dark.

And the supervisor restarts the press, printing in the boy's favor.

THE SHOESHINE LAD

For the last couple of hours the sun warms up the desert, which was frozen at night. The rays reach the crescents at the tips of the minarets, on the roofs of high rises and then glide down to the street to warm the half-naked body of the lad sleeping on the sidewalk.

It's so pleasant to sleep under the sun; sleep and feel warm for a while.

At the Ataba Central Square in Cairo, trams tail one another in a circle shaking the ground. The tough and hard-working horses pull heavy carts full of vegetables, giving rhythmic beats on the hard-paved streets.

The shoeshine lad hears all the chatter and clatter but does not move. So sweet is the early morning nap, so beautiful to get warm under the sun whose bright blessing goes to the marrow of his bones, touches his soul.

Let the world hurry. He sleeps. He does not have to rush to be on time at his workplace. The city policemen chase him as a vagrant, and do not let him loiter near the luxury hotels.

The lad can shine a pair of shoes and have his daily pita bread, yet the policemen drive him away. It's forbidden to work without a license in the street or sleep on the sidewalk in the Ataba Square.

The policeman on duty is kind. He, too, has a son. He pretends not to see the shoeshine lad and lets him sleep in a corner. In return, the boy shines the man's boots three times a

week. The man's feet are huge. The black leather is saturated with wax and shines with mere rubbing.

The lad awakes and hears the growing din and noise of the traffic yet does not move; he is comfortable.

His gown could have been white. Now it's black due to dirt and shoe wax. He has nothing else on him as clothing, underwear or shoes. The shoeshine box is under his head like a pillow. It's the safest spot for the box; no one can steal it from him.

His only treasure is the wooden chest, which contains a small tin of black wax, a piece of rag, and a brush. That's all!

The flies have rushed for a feast around the sleeping lad's lips to suck the sweet saliva dripping out of his mouth. They have also gathered around his eyes to taste the salt in the teardrops.

Everybody is in a rush. No one bothers to give a coin to the lad who is not a beggar or a tramp, but a shoeshiner. The traffic din does not let him sleep.

Now the empty stomach forces his eyes to open. The empty belly, the only thing he cannot resist. He rubs his eyes, opens them and looks at the blue sky where hungry hawks fly in circles. He runs after a tram, grabs the side-bar, jumps on the platform, holds fast with the other hand, clutches his shoeshine box close to his chest, and gets a free ride through the city to the famous Firdoussy public gardens. He walks around till evening. He shoeshines just one pair of black boots and at night returns to his usual refuge.

If, by luck, a customer shows up and puts one foot on the box, the lad sits on the ground, gives a shine to the shoes, and receives half a piaster. Nobody pays one piaster. Only at the shoeshine shop sitting in an armchair in front of a mirror on

the wall, will customers have their shoes shined for one piaster. In the street, half the price is more than enough. The lad has no shop, no furniture, no rent to pay. He buys a loaf if he shines one pair, one box of black wax if he shines ten pairs, and one brush for twenty. This is why he has a worn-out shoe brush, an old gown, and must buy the black wax even before having a loaf of bread.

Yet he must eat several times a day. If denied a fare-free ride, he has to walk to the Firdoussy, the Blue Gardens of ponds decorated with porcelain slabs in ancient Persian art style. There he finds well-to-do visitors and offers them his services with: "Shall I give a shine, Sir?"

Often the signal given turns into a loaf of bread or leaves the stomach empty, depending on the type of signal. He can tell from people's eyes, those who refuse and those full of compassion, kindness, and understanding.

The lad's bare feet are leathery and callous from walking, and black from shoe wax, dirt, and sun.

By noon, exhausted from the long walk, the lad lies down in the shade of a building or a tree. His head rests on his box, as if it were a soft pillow—the hard wooden chest! He forgets it's hard; he knows not a soft pillow. The chest is his only companion, friend, and family member. The lad loves the black shoe wax on his face and hands.

Whenever short of rags, he tears a piece of his gown, shoeshines, gets half a piaster and fills his stomach with a loaf.

The day he finds no customer, he does not despair. He waits until the Central Square is empty. The last person comes out of the theater, the boy hopes the man will put his foot on the box and order: "Quick, hurry up!"

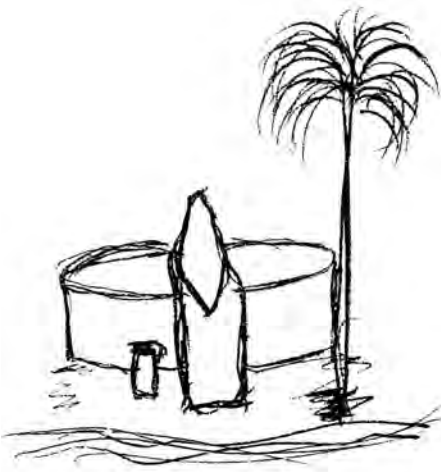
The lad prays that someone will stop and ask for a shine

even if the shoes do not need it. Even then pita bread is sold nowhere at that late hour. The lad goes behind the back wall of the Theater, cowers on the side-walk and rests his head on the box.

The shoeshine lad, wishes deep in his heart that after a bitter and cold night, the good old sun will rise and he will get warm again. He will sleep and forget about yesterday. Drowsy, the lad hears the slow familiar footfall of the policeman and holds his breath. He knows who's coming: the one on duty to get his due. The lad remains motionless, pretends to be fast asleep.

"Again lying like a street dog! If I take him to the Station, who's to shine my shoes? Let him sleep; tomorrow morning I'll come back and make him shine my shoes," says the policeman to himself and goes away.

The lad takes a deep breath of relief!



THREE PIECES OF CANDY

Jihan has three pieces of candy wrapped with bright colored paper in a carton box. She offers the sweets to the passengers packing the Heliopolis-Cairo metro. The little girl is clever, can squeeze through the commuters for a living.

Everyone has an aversion to Jihan for her oily, dirty dishevelled hair, and her tattered clothes that expose parts of her naked body.

She has delicate features. Her beautiful, black eyes heavy with swollen eyelids, are full of sadness.

What does Jihan want? How old is she? Five? Ten? How can one tell? Is it important? Yet, how in the world is she to grow up if she does not know the taste of candies wrapped in green, red, and yellow. Only three pieces in the box. No more, no less. An excuse? May be. It's her way to make a living with a free ride.

The ticket seller has strict instructions. He does not allow non-paying passengers. Hanging from his shoulder is a leather bag for the ticket money he collects. He is kind, and father of three. For the love of them the man commutes constantly with the bagful of coins, but keeps the paper money in his bosom pocket next to his heart, away from the reach of pickpockets. Things may happen if he is not watchful.

He also lets Jihan travel, so that she may have a piece of bread and cheese, never butter! Does it matter if the commuters are not happy? Which is more important, discontent of the people or leaving the girl hungry? Isn't it a pity? Have they no heart?

Let Jihan travel, not necessarily the Line's entire length, but only to the Main Railway Station.

The Metroline runs down from the desert in Heliopolis to the River Nile bank near the luxury hotels where tourists come to enjoy the warm winter sun in Egypt, the blue sky, the Pyramids, and the palm trees with leaves swaying in the breeze along the River. From this end of the Line, Jihan jumps onto the iron step of the carriage. Many others do so to have standing room.The Metroline packed to capacity, carries a human flood.

The ticket seller has seen the girl with the candy box. Let people say what they want. Life is a precious gift that must be loved even to the one cast away onto the street. No bother to him if Jihan doesn't sell candy. Isn't she doing her best, running ten to twenty hours a day, jumping from one carriage to the next for a few piasters? Sometimes not even having any candy? Then she starts crying. Seeing her tears, the ticket seller is moved: "Damn! Suppose I took home one loaf less, skipped smoking cigarette, and lost a piaster."

He drops a coin into the carton box. "I don't need candy," he tells Jihan.

The box serves its purpose. Others may do so and not pick up any candy. People will seem to be buying, give the illusion of it. This way Jihan will not become a beggar. She can then fool herself that she is alive.

Jihan knows not the taste of the candy. To sell the precious

morsel, yet not knowing its taste! One day she decides to find out. Is it a sin to learn, to aim high above the stomach—the head, to taste candy? Jihan has the urge to find out. An urge that all of a sudden moves her heart. She too has a soul. She feels she should taste the stuff she is selling, to make sure it's worth offering, the suffering she's enduring for the love of candies. Her dry mouth starts watering. Saliva oozes out of her thin lips and then comes down her chin. She looks like a teething child. A supreme effort makes her grab the precious candies she carries, tearing open with shaking fingers the colored wrappings and puts the sweets into her mouth—three pieces in all! Her heart starts pounding because of the resulting emotion.

Just three pieces of candy fill her mouth with sweet juice, anoint her palate, slake her thirst, and make Jihan content and happy. What if she takes a piece of candy daily? Why hasn't she tasted a bonbon all this while? The world is so wonderful now. People have sweet smiles. The passengers seem to be telling her: "Eat candy and be happy!"

Now at the terminal, Jihan waits with the empty box in her hand. She isn't selling sweets. She doesn't have any to sell.

What is she? A beggar? Pickpocket? A free rider?

Surveillance is tight that day. Undercover agents around tourist hotels arrest those loitering there and take them to the House of Correction. A Secret Agent soon arrests Jihan, takes her to a waiting van, and leaves her to the Police Sergeant in charge. Jihan weeps, cries out, wails, and protests: "I ain't done nothin' wrong. Let go! I took nothin' from nobody, three pieces of candy only, by Allah!"

"Shut up!" roars the Sergeant, "Dirty liar! We'll clean you up, give you some bread and clothing, teach you a trade so you

won't beg, but work! Aren't you happy? You, ungrateful wretch!" Then he slaps her on the face.

Strange indeed! She does not feel any real pain and rubs her face, red from the slap. She will have a place at last to sleep, will work, earn money, and eat sweet candy. She is exhausted, tired, and drowsy. She crouches in a corner, with the sweet taste of three pieces of candy in her mouth.

TEN FINGERS

In the dark of night, by the old Mosque, on the pavement and sheltered from the desert wind, ten boys burnt a bunch of straw and wood splinters to warm themselves at the fire. The yellow flame painted in gold their skinny faces and buried their sleepy eyes in dark dimples.

Nobody walked in the street. Shops had closed and the desert hush crept in and took over the City of the Sun, Heliopolis. The street light spread its round carpet on the ground. The red light globe hung in front of the pharmacy at the corner, swinging from the wind like a pendulum, counting the time of life slipping by.

The lads were warming their dirty hands, worn out bodies, and bare feet turned tough by walking amid street dirt. The boys were so close to the bonfire, which like a faithful dog, licked their hands and feet. The flame was the boys' only friend, their "home" where they met in hunger or with little food in their stomachs, yet always to get warm and have light!

The flame did not cheat these kids. It knew what they wanted—warmth—and provided generously and equally to all, but it could not fill the belly.

Sitting in a circle, next to the wall of the Mosque, they slept close to one another, coiled up, as brothers in one fate.

Whenever Ahmed had a pita bread, he shared it with his friends so that all would sleep better. But of what use is one single loaf when ten kids are to grow up, laugh, play, and live!

Each day these kids walked along the pavements, under searing sun, rain, and in storm; all the time looking for cigarette butts. Each one of them would pick up from the street—head bent down as if in eternal guilt or perhaps looking in vain for luck—cigarette butts, collecting them in a round tin box. The kids would take the pick to Hadji, the fat man with a turban, who grabbed away their hard-won earnings. They received one Egyptian piaster for a day's work. Hadji emptied the butts into a secret box in the shop. Apparently he sold incense and wax candles to the pious. He would clean the tobacco and sell it well below market price.

All day Hadji kept to his chair while the boys roamed the streets. Hadji grew fatter, the kids wasted away. Hadji had a home and a family, the kids slept on the pavement. Hadji was respected and esteemed; the kids were chased and driven away like street dogs.

Now and then the kids did try hard work as porters, carrying home ladies' bags full of stuff from the market. When exhausted, they again gathered by the Mosque.

They shared discarded food from waste bins, bread from restaurants, and any other foodstuff no longer needed for proper human consumption. Stripping bones of any bit of meat, they threw away the bare bones to the street dogs, their only faithful friends!

These poor kids became filthy! Their dishevelled hair, skinny bodies made them ugly as sin!

And they were fouling the main square! Even the pavement turned black due to the wind-blown smoke.

People complained about the unbearable soot situation. The waste collector cursed the boys, and shopkeepers chased them away: "Hoodlums!" they shouted.

The neighbors complained because soot and smoke together with the yellow sand blown from the desert were causing havoc.

Nobody loved these kids or knew why they were alive, or who had brought them into the world. "Where are their parents? Of what use are these boys?" people asked.

The kids kept roaming the streets only to get together and spend the night by the Mosque.

The cops came and took the boys to the Station. And as usual, Hadji, the tobacco dealer, came to their rescue and let them go free. How could he live without their help? They were —sort of—his ten "fingers!"

Ahmed was the most daring of the ten. He had attempted to become clean by bathing in the public bath, yet his gown was in shreds and still wet. The bitter cold wind blowing from the desert reached like a dagger to his bones and chilled the marrow. The other teammates sat in a circle around the fire. Two were stripping bits of meat left on the bones picked up from the garbage.

With a strong shiver, Ahmed leaped close to the bonfire, almost standing on it to dry his worn-out gown and more and more to feel the warmth.

In an instant, his clothes were in flames as if touched by a match. With a shrill cry, Ahmed jumped away from the fire. He turned into a human torch. His friends rushed to his rescue. Ahmed with a heart-rending cry, burnt in the center of the square. His pals threw their old clothing over him. They put out the flame, laid him down on the ground, unconscious.

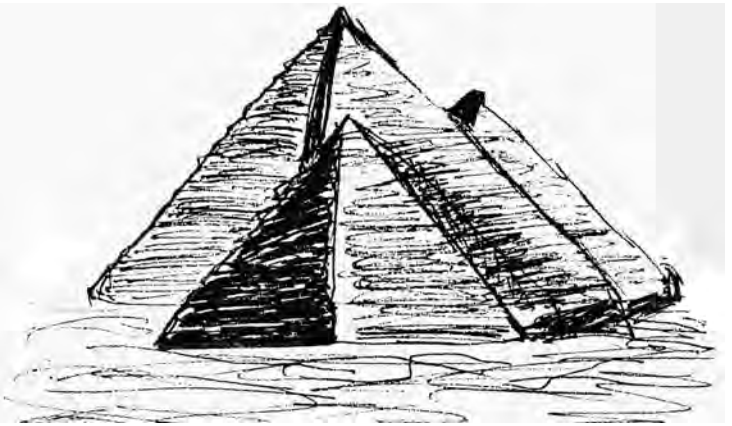
The Emergency van rushed to Ahmed's rescue, took him to the Red Crescent Hospital where for the first and last time

in his life he had a soft bed to sleep on until he felt pain no more!

So, Hadji's "finger" had caught fire and burnt like a candle, yet he did not feel any pain. He could replace on the spot the one gone with ten new ones, if need be. He was satisfied with the ten.

Early the following morning, the Police took into custody the boys who were playing with fire: a real danger to the public, the buildings around the Square.

For a short while the Square regained its former shape and shine. But again, Hadji, the tobacco dealer came to the rescue of these kids, took back his "fingers," and replaced the missing tenth!



THE STRONGEST MAN ON EARTH

"I am the Strongest Man on Earth!" roars the thin man with a frail body.

"Ha! Ha!" laughs his partner with strong muscles and a huge body. "You? Ali?" and blows really hard.

The buffoon falls flat on his back.

The man with strong muscles starts pounding his chest with both fists, roaring and inviting the tenants of nearby buildings and passersby to the show of his Herculean strength.

Every Sunday, the two heroes come back and repeat their usual act, and surely a large crowd of onlookers shows up. It seems nobody gets tired of the amazing theatrics of brute force!

The Strongest Man on Earth repeats three times: "I have incredible strength and those absent from the show will miss the best time of their lives!"

Kids and men of all ages gather and form a large circle. The Strongest Man roars, blows hard and poor Ali, an ordinary man, falls flat on his back. The spectators always applaud the victor.

The man whose face is coated in white, stands up with effort and announces in tears: "Ladies and Gentlemen, you'll see games that will thrill and amaze you!"

Then he takes off his crushed hat and begins collecting

coins for the defeat he suffered. Many of the onlookers each drop a piece of coin, others quietly melt away, people from the balconies and windows disappear.

The spectators are not short of coins but lack the heart to witness the clown in defeat.

Among the spectators two men come forward and with all their strength tie the strongest Man on Earth with a rope so tight, to the point of crushing his bones, almost suffocating him. He does not utter a word of protest, but instead he wants to get free soon so he can have a loaf of bread to eat. Yet, he is forced to remain bound so tight. Then he bends iron bars with his teeth, showing practical proof of the strength stored in him.

How in the world does this man ever possess his Herculian power? What does he eat? Chicken, bread and cheese, or onions and beans?

If eating chicken makes one so strong, why then are so weak the people who eat chicken only?

Those who keep on watching want to see the man bound with a rope. They are sorry for him and come forward to help. Only by paying money can they set the Strongest Man on Earth free!

The street has light traffic but is noisy since the kids have no playground nearby. The moment Ali roars, "I am the Strongest Man on Earth!" the din and clamor cease, the little devils turn into angels and sit on the ground in a circle.

The giant looks around, sees the kids who with respectful expectation wait for the show to begin, and knows he will get nothing out of them. They will only clap as a token of their appreciation.

Clapping is not good enough if the man is to earn money and make a living. He must therefore repeat the performance

elsewhere, pretend to suffer no bodily pain but look fresh and happy.

Every Sunday Ali and his famous friend come to the street. The former in order not to fall on the ground, while the latter to be able to blow—to have the strength to blow real hard. Although windows and balconies are full of people and kids form a circle in the street and love watching the Strongest Man on Earth bend the iron bar like soft dough, no one present is unhappy about the way the man sets himself free with no help from anyone. But whenever Ali takes the hat in his hand, some spectators fall away like rose petals. Kids only remain faithful to the end, that is, until Ali and his friend leave and go away.

The jesters keep coming back to play their roles of the Vanquished and the Victor. People rush to the street and nearby balconies become full of onlookers, whenever they hear the roar: "I am the Strongest Man on Earth!"

OUR STREET DOG

Our street dog was unique in his class. Different from the rest of the clan, he at least had a master—old Sayed, who worked for the shopkeeper who sold cigarettes. Sayed was also sort of a night watchman for the building and the stores nearby.

Short in stature, he had a powerful voice, which announced his presence loud and clear with *salaam aleykoom* greeting to passersby. A strong voice is a must for the weak, the ugly, and the poor. In fact for anyone who has turned the sidewalk into his home—a corner lean to made of cardboard covered with old tin boxes as its roof. This was the only home Sayed had. With nothing in it, the shabby little house made up all his worldly possessions.

He had spent his life there on the sidewalk. It was on that sidewalk that he took his meals, washed his face once a week, and had his monthly haircut and shave sitting there on the stone, with a piece of broken mirror in his hand trying to find out who he was. The image staring back from the mirror showed his ugliness, which he never really saw. The little eyes, the shrinking toothless mouth, the almost nonexistent nose—all in perfect harmony—but still he wondered: "Why am I so lonely in the world? No wife, no children, no friends, not even a distant kin."

Sayed had his master, Mahmoud, the cigarette seller, who provided him with home made food, a pack of cigarettes, and a few piasters for tea.

These made up all that Sayed earned daily. He pleased himself with the food that was offered. Whether he ate it or not was his business. He was free. Every day he shared his lunch with the dog, "You're my good friend! Here, eat!" The only true friend that shared its luck with Sayed.

For years, thousands of Egyptian pounds have found their way into the cigarette shop for goods sold and secretly converted into genuine gold, then silently slipped into the iron safe. Mahmoud guarded his own iron safe and never left that corner, which was so poorly lit, cold, and humid. He was fat, sick with arthritis, and had a weak heart in his huge body. His Hope, his Future, and his *real* Heart, were all locked in that iron safe, away from evil and greedy eyes.

"Poor Mahmoud, so sick yet always by his safe, but I am so thankful for the sunshine, and for what Allah gives me," would say Sayed to himself, breathing the pure air, listening to the song of the birds in the trees and looking at the heavens, marveling at the infinite beauty in blue, and at night staring at the sparkling stars and the moon.

Mahmoud was pale like a piece of old parchment, yellow in the face, while Sayed was in perfect health and had the tan of a vacationer just back from Alexandria, or from any one of those fabulous summer resorts with golden beaches, which he had never seen during his seventy years of life. But he and his master had identical roles as faithful guardians.

Mahmoud had many assistants who ran about selling cigarettes all day long.

They would joke with Sayed: "Let *him* have a break and breathe some fresh air!"

"And who's to get the money?"

"You!" they would say laughing.

Sayed did not care how the gold was collected. He began his work when the others had finished their daily business and locked the store to go home. From that moment on, Sayed would not leave his corner. Until the following morning, he would guard the shop, put fire to the wood chips, make tea, and invite a passerby to share a cup of hot drink with him, *"Faddal!"* He would always look for someone to chat with, as he felt so lonely!

Not a single thief or thug ever dared to approach our quarter and the neighbors always gave *bakshish* (tip) as a token of appreciation to Sayed. They gave him an old pair of shoes, and some old clothes, which he would put on over what he was already wearing for better protection against the cold night.

Sayed's presence was enough there, policeman or no policeman. He was always to be found there, and he was never alone. True, a wife, a son, a home of these he had none. Instead he had a faithful friend—the color of sand, hungry, and dirty all the time—a street dog.

No one knew from where that wanderer came, that half-breed of a dog. Why hadn't anybody taken it to guard his garden and home, feed it, and love it? Why was the dog left to its fate, in the street? When did these two, Sayed and the dog, become friends and what was the basis of their friendship? Was it the sharing of food, the loneliness, or the mutual love and faithfulness?

No, Sayed was never alone at night. He had his dog with him, Our Street Dog. Sayed could sleep if he wanted to. The dog would keep a sharp eye on him, expecting nothing of Sayed, except perhaps a soft caress on its back.

Sayed gave pieces of bread to the dog. The bones always were the dog's share. Not any dog's, but Sayed's best friend, *the*

dog: the good yellow dog, the youthful and faithful dog, for it to bite, nibble and crush the tough bones with its steel teeth as if they were mere biscuits. The dog was lucky it had teeth. Sayed had none and was not happy, yet he did not envy the dog. Though the animal had nothing at all, it was young, vigorous, and went around the town streets, visiting the public parks with its sweethearts, fighting with crooked rivals, chasing them and returning with extraordinary shine in its big black eyes. It would return to Sayed, meek and quiet as a sheep, stretching itself on the sidewalk, panting a little, and letting out its red tongue for the breeze to cool.

This unclean animal had been the sole guardian, companion, and friend of Sayed. They used to have lunch together, and fight fleas and lice, which feasted on their blood, giving them no peace.

The dog kept silent by day, but barked all the time after midnight. Once it tried to bite the feet of a policeman making his rounds. The man became furious. "I am gonna have the bastard killed!" he threatened. Sayed tried to make the man forget about the matter with a sweet "*Maalesh,* please forget what happened. This dog is gentle and does not bite anyone."

But the policeman remembered what the dog had done to him. Early one morning, the sharp crack of gunfire shook our peaceful quarter. At first I thought the explosion came from the burst tire of a speeding car. Next I heard a mournful yelling. The sound was familiar to me. "It's the dog!" I said and ran into the street.

A crowd had already gathered a short distance away in the back street of the Greek church, barely forty meters from the cigarette shop. The scene was heartrending. The dog lying on

the ground with blood draining from its body, while trying in vain to stand on its feet and break through the surrounding human ring that was becoming tighter.

A few steps away, the white uniformed policeman with black boots, blue cap, and wide leather belt, was caressing the double-barreled gun in his hand, watching with satisfaction the animal he had just shot.

The dog was howling and making a supreme effort to escape, but remained helpless, while blood stained the street scarlet. The blood, like a thick carpet, was slowly spreading around the dog. No one came to help the wounded, dying animal, afraid of being bitten, since the dog might have been rabid.

True, some cases of rabies had been reported lately and armed policemen were looking for stray dogs to shoot, for the good of the people.

Sayed was watching the crowd, but could not let the store remain unguarded; he was merely doing his duty. What's a dog after all, just a street dog? If anything happened to the shop, what would he do? Where and from whom would he get help?

I asked the policeman to put an end to the dog's suffering. People around me protested although they had watched the suffering animal in silent disdain. "It's a pity to have the poor dog shot again, ya *khawaga* (sir)!"

The policeman heard my plea. With a piece of paper he got hold of the tail and threw aside the dying dog, which tried to bite him. The man took a step back and with a second bullet, shot the animal into eternal silence.

The dog was lying under the fence, peacefully, feeling no pain, having no desires any more. With its eyes open, it was as if watching those passing by. The women, men, students, and

old Sayed who had seen its last moments, yet had not come to its aid, not even done the favor of a last caress, or said a kind word!

Those present barely threw a glance at the carcass and hastened to their work; others watched sadly and left like the customers of a circus.

There it was: lying motionless, jaws wide open like its eyes. The animal had been unable to take its revenge and bite the killer.

The sight of the dog was disgusting to me in every way. Bathed in abominable dirt and blood, it was extremely ugly to look at and the legions of flies amassed over the corpse threatened to become a health hazard.

"Not a thing of beauty anymore on the dog: utter ugliness and dirt, nothing else," I said to myself. But is it possible to look for the beautiful and not find it? At last I saw the very thing I was looking for. How wonderfully beautiful and clean were the canine teeth—white, pearl-like, and sharp. They made a queer contrast with the dog's blood-stained and dirty body. In what particular way could these teeth keep their purity in all that filth? Who would tell me where the dog's soul could possibly have escaped?

"Poor soul!" I said, and remembered the dog's master, or the one who supposedly had been its master and friend: old man Sayed with no teeth at all in his mouth.

On my return home at noon, they had removed the dead body. I could still see black patches of dried blood in the middle of the street.

The following morning the street was clean again. Not a single trace of the crime.

Being faithful to Sayed had not saved the dog from its

bloody fate. The animal had been so useful to everyone—the shopkeeper, the neighbors—it had kept away robbers and men of doubtful intentions. And the bullet that had granted it death, became a savior, a symbol of human pity, and the recompense of perfect faithfulness.

"One street dog less and for the better," said the neighbors.

"Another will take its place. Yes, Sir!" said Sayed.

He is alone now, hasn't even a dog with him. Yet he has his master, Mahmoud who guards the safe with loving care and genuine, perfect faithfulness of which in such abundance had bestowed upon old man Sayed, Our Street Dog.

THE BOWAB

(THE DOORKEEPER)

A wonderful statue in black granite quarried from rocks along the River Nile bank of Upper Egypt was brought to Cairo. A beautiful image it was in perfect pharaonic style, tall, manly, handsome, but of bone and flesh, with blood and heart in the body.

Twenty years ago, Hassan left his native village hut, came to Cairo and found work in building construction. Young and full of energy, he had simple food: bread, black beans, cheese, and green onions. He saved money and kept it in his white turban. Hassan slept on the building materials of yellow sand and red bricks at night as watchman. He prayed that the construction would soon be over and he would become the *bowab* of the new apartment building.

Meanwhile he met his Luck: the owner's wife, the cotton-white young woman.

Never in his life had Hassan seen such a white beauty. Soon, Hassan became the *bowab*. Like a statue, he sat at the gate and guarded the building perfectly.

Once the owner's young wife took along Hassan in her car to the market, to have his muscular presence next to her and feel it. While driving, she was careless about her skirt, which gathered above her knees, revealing her beautiful legs and thighs. In an instant, Hassan turned into a stone statue. He

came out clean of the temptation. It was a matter of honor to be faithful. He was only the *bowab,* nothing more.

"How are you, Hassan?"

"Very well, Ma'm. Glory to Allah!"

"Do you enjoy your work?"

"Yes, Ma'm. Glory to Allah!"

"Married?"

"No, Ma'm."

"Anyone special?"

"Yes, Ma'm: my father, mother, brothers, sisters, uncles!"

"Not them! I mean a bride-elect?"

He again remained silent like a statue. A short trip on the desert road was of no avail.

Construction completed, the owner took his wife to Alexandria to live in their new villa and left Hassan in charge of collecting the rent, looking after the property and safety of the residents, and keeping half the rent of one flat in lieu of his fixed salary. The residents gave the other half to Hassan for being their *bowab*.

When Hassan had saved one hundred Egyptian pounds, he went back to his village and fetched a young girl, kind, faithful, and of the same stock. He purchased a bed, a wardrobe with mirror, two chairs, bare essentials of kitchenware, and occupied a room on the roof.

Hassan was happy. One month before their child's birth, he sent his wife back to her parents in the village where they took proper care of her, did whatever was necessary, put the baby in shape, and sent both back to Cairo. Hassan wearing his white flowing *jalabia* robe and the turban, went to the Central Rail Station, met his wife and baby. They came back in a coach, never a taxi!

Outside their home, man and wife were silent statues and never spoke to each other. It was different when they were home: a single room on the vast and confined roof. They had children year after year and raised them there.

The kids grew up, left to their fate and to Allah, on the roof, in the open air with plenty of sunshine, feeding on their mother's milk. If the kids survived, good! If they didn't, Allah would send the next one. In fifteen years, He had left him only seven. Hassan never complained. Allah knew best. He was Just, Merciful.

Sitting on a high-stool as the *bowab,* Hassan kept an eye on those entering the building. The renters felt safe and happy too!

As soon as Ahmed, the eldest son became a young man, Hassan asked him to marry a girl from the village and have a family of his own. As to his daughters, Hassan chose fellow countrymen's sons working in Cairo, to become sons-in-law. At the age of sixty, Hassan lost his wife. For forty days, he lived alone.

Sitting on the high-stool, he remembered the old times. He was lucky indeed. Allah loved him and granted him a long life. Only a few could dream to be the *bowab* of a high-rise!

Hassan was well-known. He asked a friend to write a letter to the village, and then took as wife his twenty-year-old cousin. Unknown women lacked the charm he was looking for. He knew so well Salwa's parents. The bride was very happy. She would be seeing the Capital, the city lights, the high-rises, the cars, and would no longer be living in a hut of white-wash mud bricks.

Hassan had two more children and Allah granted life to both: Abdo and Abbas. Abdo was an intelligent kid. Hassan

nourished great hopes for him. "I'll send him to school where he will learn to read and write. Soon he will compose my letters and read my mail." He rewarded Abdo, by giving him pocket money. Abdo saved it so that one day he could go back to the old village and purchase a cow!

A tenant converted his flat into a private dental clinic. Hassan asked the Doctor to let Abdo work at the clinic.

"Let him go to school first and then we'll see. During the summer vacation, may be."

"But he's in summer vacation now, Doctor."

The Dentist agreed and gave a white coverall to Abdo who let in and out visiting patients. Some kind of a doorkeeper, a *bowab!*

Abdo saved the *baksheesh* (tip) he received from the patients. He wanted someday to become a dentist too. Fellow villagers saw in him the future dental surgeon and patiently waited for Abdo to grow up and take care of their toothache. Meanwhile they used aspirin: "Learn quick, Abdo" they would urge him, "So you'll be our Doc!"

"Allah willin'."

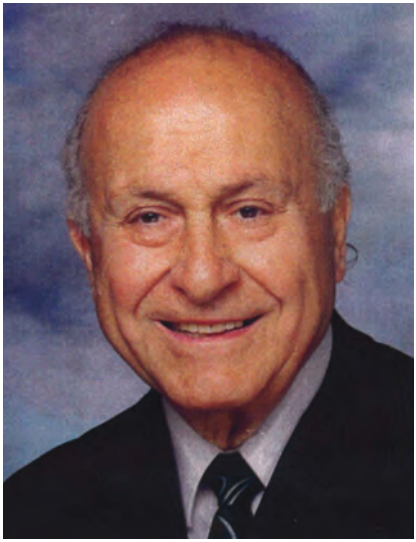
Hassan was happy that one day his son would be a doctor.

"The rest is easy, once you start on a course!" he reasoned.

"We must first want to be somebody, then Allah will help us. I wanted to be a *bowab* and I did. My son wants to become a doctor, and doctor he will be." And fearing he had left out the main point, added: "Allah willin'!"

Hassan kept on giving pocket money to Abdo, a very special son to be literate and not become a *bowab!*

THE AUTHOR



Born in Cilicia, Turkey, Armen Dadour took refuge with his family in Egypt and settled in the Nile Delta where he grew up, went to school, visited the countryside, keenly observed the peasants, the *fellaheen,* and saw at first-hand their lives—simple yet rich in ancient culture and traditions.

Eventually Dadour moved to Cairo, made his way to college and later obtained a diploma in Architecture from London. However, he had the writing bug and architecture enhanced in him the understanding and appreciation of art. He worked hard at writing short stories, essays, travel notes, etc., and left nothing to chance to achieve a certain ease in his writings.

His leisure-time activities include reading masterpieces of world literature, listening to classical music, famous arias of operas, attending plays at the theater, and taking long walks early in the morning with his dog, Ace.

Dadour lives in Southern California since 1980.

THE ARTIST

Armenouhi Jamgotchian is a painter born in Cairo, Egypt, a student of Ashod Zorian, and a 1964 graduate of A.B.C. Art School of Paris, France. Her first works were exhibited in 1970 in Beirut, Lebanon. Since then she has taken part in a number of collective and personal exhibitions in Egypt and other countries. Her works are found in private collections at the Museum of Modern Art in Cairo, Egypt. She also has many icons in several churches in Egypt and throughout the world. Currently she is a member of the Artists' Syndicate of Egypt.

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