



The Essential
**Yusuf
Idris**

Masterpieces of the
Egyptian Short Story

Edited by
Denys Johnson-Davies

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Introduction



Yusuf Idris was born in 1927, the eldest son of a man whose work required him to be away from home most of the time. Idris endured a lonely childhood controlled by parents and grandparents who seem to have been strict and undemonstrative to a boy who craved love and attention. His student years at university coincided with the era of British occupation, and these years were followed by the period of King Farouk's rule, a time marked by rampant corruption. Yusuf Idris, a medical student, was active in politics and this interest remained with him throughout his life. However, he found himself always to be against those who were in power. Even Gamal Abd al-Nasser whom, like most other Egyptians, Idris had supported in his revolution, fell out of Idris's favor, for it wasn't long before he became aware that few of the aims pronounced so eloquently by the new leader had in fact been accomplished. Inevitably, Idris was arrested for his political activities and, like so many other intellectuals, spent time in prison.

Creative writing occupied the mind of the young Yusuf Idris from his early student days, his first short story being published in 1951 and his first collected volume, *The Cheapest Nights*, in 1954, with an introduction from no less a scholar than Taha Hussein, the blind student from a lowly background who, having completed his studies in Paris, was to become Egypt's minister of culture and the leading personality in the field of

scholarship and letters. Yet it was against such figures as Taha Hussein that Yusuf found himself rebelling. He felt that Arabic literature had become stagnant, that it required a revolution, and that it was no good simply adding to the culture of the past, much of which he described as being “crammed with nonsense.” He was also acutely aware of the vast gulf that separated the educated classes from the man in the street, a gulf brought about by divisions of language, since the educated classes were versed in the classical language, of which the vast majority of Egyptians were ignorant or at best ill-informed. For this reason, Yusuf Idris quickly became a fervent supporter of colloquial Arabic.

In 1960 Idris made the decision to give up medicine to pursue a career as a writer and journalist. Despite his great talents and general recognition as one of the Arab world’s leading writers, certainly as the short-story writer with the greatest authority and imagination, Idris lived his whole life under the impression that he had not been adequately rewarded or appreciated. This feeling came to a head when, having been nominated for the Nobel prize, he was passed over for the award in favor of Naguib Mahfouz. This should not have come as a surprise to him, since Mahfouz had produced an output, particularly of novels, which far exceeded his own. Mahfouz had also attracted the attention of translators who had translated many of his novels into English and French, and it was in these two languages that the Nobel prize committee could judge the work of potential nominees. Few translators had devoted any time to rendering Yusuf’s large volume of work, mostly in the form of short stories, into the major languages. In fact, while much of his work in Arabic found its way into collected volumes of short stories, many of his stories remained virtually ignored in the magazines in which they had originally appeared. It was therefore understandable that he should not have received the same attention from translators as Mahfouz.

I feel that his stories speak for themselves and show how he differed in his approach to literature from most of his contemporaries. He had a special concern for the underdog, his works revealing a sympathetic knowledge of the disadvantaged that was mostly lacking in other writers. Much of what he felt about the way many of his fellow Egyptians were treated can be

summed up in the title of the very first of his stories that I translated, “It’s Not Fair.”* It is one of his shorter stories, but it is no less effective for that, as it underlines the cruel differences that separate rich from poor in Egypt, differences that seem to remain no matter what the regime in power. Yusuf Idris, more than other Egyptian writers, was outspoken in his contempt for the rich and powerful and their heartless exploitation of the less fortunate and of the various forms of hypocrisy that this gave rise to. I also point out this story in particular because it is one that I have not come across in the many volumes of short stories compiled by various translators over the years; it shows, perhaps, that prolific as Idris was, especially in his earlier years, not a few of his stories have simply fallen by the wayside.

In the 1960s the BBC Arabic service decided to hold a short-story competition and asked me to be one of the judges. The other two judges were the Palestinian poet and critic Salma Khadra Jayyusi and the Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih. An initial shortlist of the stories submitted was put together by the Arab staff at the BBC, so that we the judges were left with twenty stories to read, from which we were required to choose three prize winners. I was intrigued by a rather short story entitled, if my memory serves me correctly, “The Dog.” As usually happens on these occasions, the judges differed in their opinions of the twenty stories, and many arguments ensued between us. I, however, was adamant that “The Dog” should at the very least earn one of the prizes, if not first prize; in the event, it won second. I was astonished to learn later that, with the announcement of the results, none other than the Arab world’s number one short-story writer, Yusuf Idris, had written to the BBC to point out that “The Dog” had in fact been written by him and had appeared in a magazine, for which Idris cited the name and date. It seemed that someone had entered the story in his own name, not suspecting that anyone might recognize it as having been written by Yusuf Idris and published in an obscure magazine. Literary competitions are fraught with such dangers, and I only hope that Idris was well compensated by the BBC.

* *Under the Naked Sky* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2000).

Yusuf Idris and I would often meet during the 1960s, when I had an office in London. During this time, much of the conversation between us revolved around his writing and its comparative lack of success both in Arabic and in English translation. It therefore came as a real blow to him when he was passed over for the Nobel prize in favor of Mahfouz. Before this event, many habitués of Cairo's literary cafés had felt that if the prize were to be awarded to an Egyptian writer then Yusuf Idris was the obvious choice, that he of all writers could lead Arabic literature down fresh paths. It was not to be.

The fact remains that Yusuf Idris retains his position as the master of the Arabic short story, despite the obvious decline in the popularity of the genre in the Arab world—and indeed elsewhere. Readers looking through this select volume of his considerable output will find several stories that I translated myself. Yet despite my immense admiration for his work and the friendship between us, I did not produce a volume of his stories in English translation. Was it perhaps because publishers at the time also showed a preference for novels? This meant that until now anyone wishing to gain a comprehensive view of Idris's writings has had to look around in a large number of publications. My hope is that *The Essential Yusuf Idris* will fill that gap.

Denys Johnson-Davies

The Cheapest Nights



A little after evening prayers a torrent of abuse gushing out of Abd al-Kerim came pouring down on the entire village, sweeping Tantawi and all his ancestors in its wake.

No sooner had he rushed through the four prostrations than Abd al-Kerim stole out of the mosque and hurried down the narrow lane, apparently irritated, one hand clasping the other tightly behind his back. He was leaning forward, his shoulders bent, almost as if weighed down by the woolen shawl he was wearing, which he had spun with his own hands from the wool of his ewe. Presently he raised his brass-yellow face and caught the wind on the tip of his long hooked nose, blotched with many ugly black spots. He muttered, clenching his teeth, and the taut dry skin of his face wrinkled, bringing the points of his mustache level with the tips of his eyebrows, which were still speckled with drops of water from his ablutions.

His irritation grew as he trudged along down the narrow lane trying to find a path for his large flat feet with cracks in their soles so deep they could easily swallow up a nail.

The lane was teeming with youngsters scattered like breadcrumbs, tumbling about in all directions, and getting in his way. They pulled at his shawl, knocked against him, and made him cut his large protruding toe on the bits of tin they were kicking in his path. All he could do was lash out at

them, vituperating furiously against their fathers and their forefathers, the rotten seed that gave them life, and the midwife who brought them to existence. Shaking with rage he cursed, and swore, and snorted, and spat on the wretched town where brats sprouted out of the ground in greater numbers than the hairs on one's head. But he comforted himself with the thought that the future was going to take care of them. Half of them were sure to die of starvation, while cholera would carry off the rest.

He sighed with relief as he emerged from the swarming lane into the open square surrounding the pond which stood in the middle of the town. Darkness spread before him where the low gray houses nestled close to one another, with heaps of manure piled before them like long-neglected graves. Only a few lamps shining across the wide circle of night indicated that there were living creatures packed beneath their roofs. Their dim red lights, winking in the distance like the fiery eyes of sprites, came across and sank in the blackness of the pool.

Abd al-Kerim peered into the gloom that stretched before him, the stink from the swamp winding its way up his nostrils. It oppressed him so he couldn't breathe. The thought of the townspeople already snoring behind their bolted doors oppressed him even more. But now his anger turned on Tantawi, the watchman, as he recalled the glass of tea the latter had offered him in the glow of sunset, and which his parched throat and his longing for it had forced him to accept at the cost of his pride.

It was very still in the square. Still as a graveyard; nothing stirred. Abd al-Kerim walked on, but halfway across he halted. Not without reason. Had he followed where his feet were taking him, in a few paces he would have been home and, having bolted the door behind him, there was nothing for him but to flop on his pallet and go to sleep, and there was not a grain of sleep in his eyes just then. His head felt clearer than pump water, lighter than pure honey, and he could have stayed awake till the next crescent moon of Ramadan appeared. All because he couldn't resist a glass of black tea, and Tantawi's fiendish smile.

And now he felt no desire to sleep and the townspeople were all huddled, snoring in their hovels, leaving the night to their obnoxious children. What was he to do with himself? Stay up. But where? Doing what? Should

he join the boys playing hide-and-seek? Or hang around for the little girls to gather round him and snigger? Where could he go with his pockets picked clean? Not a wretched piaster with which to take himself to Abou al-Assaad's den, for instance. There he could order a coffee and then smoke a waterpipe and stay till all hours, or sit and watch solicitors' clerks at their game of cards, and listen to the radio blaring out things he didn't understand. He could laugh to his heart's content poking Abou Khalil in the ribs and then move on to where Mo'Allem* Ammar was sitting with the cattle dealers and join their conversation about the slump in the market. But he hadn't a wretched piaster. God bring your house to ruin, Tantawi!

Nor could he go across to Shaykh Abd al-Megid's, where he was sure to find him squatting behind a brazier with a coffee-pot gently boiling on top. al-Sheehy would be there, sitting near him, telling of the nights that made his hair turn gray, and the days gone by when he had thrived on the simple-minded, kind-hearted folks of those days, and how he was made to repent of swindling and thieving and laying waste of other people's crops by the wily generation of today.

No, he couldn't even go there, because only the day before he had pushed the man into the basin below the waterwheel and made a laughing stock of him. They'd been having an argument over the cost of repairing the wheel. Not a civil word had passed between them since.

If only he could just grab his ferruled cane and go to collect Sama'an and together make off for the neighboring farm of al-Balabsa. There was fun to be had over there. Wedding feasts, and dancing girls, and high jinks, and merry-making, and what-have-you. But where was the money for all that? Besides, it was late. Very likely Sama'an would have gone to make it up with his wife at her uncle's, where she was staying. And the road was treacherous, and everything was pitch black. Merciful God! Why must he be the only clod in town tormented by lack of sleep? And Tantawi. *He* wasn't tormented. *He* was probably snoring away peacefully in some quiet nook. God in heaven, let him snore his away to hell!

* Master of a trade.

Suppose now that he were simply to go home like a God-fearing man. He would nudge his wife and make her get up and light the petrol lamp, heat the oven, warm him a loaf of bread and bring him the green peppers left over from lunch. With luck there might be a piece of pie left over too, which his wife's mother had sent them in the morning. And then she'd make him a nice brew of fenugreek and after that, pleased as a sultan, he'd sit and repair the handles of his three worn reed baskets.

Yes, what if he did just that? Would the station take wings and fly, or would the heavens collapse on the threshing floor? He knew no such thing was likely to occur. He also knew his wife. She would be lying like a bag of maize with her brood of six scattered round her like a litter of puppies. Nothing would make her stir. Not even the angel Israfil blowing his trumpet to raise the dead. And even if by some miracle she were to wake up, what then? He wasn't kidding himself. The petrol lamp was only half full and the woman would be needing it when she sat up to bake all night tomorrow. That is, if they all lived till tomorrow. And the children, growing hungry at sundown, would have devoured the last of the peppers with the last scrap of bread. And the pie was sure to have followed after the peppers and the bread. As for fenugreek and sugar, he needn't worry. There simply wasn't any in his house. And never again was he going to be offered a glass of tea like the one he had drained at Tantawi's.

God damn your soul to hell, Tantawi, son of Zebeida!

Anyone coming to relieve himself in the square at that hour, and seeing Abd al-Kerim planted in the middle of it like a scarecrow, would have thought him touched in the head or possessed of a devil. He was neither. Just a man whose perplexity was greater than he could deal with. A simple man, unfamiliar with the things of the night, the tea playing havoc with his head; his pockets stripped clean on a cold winter's night, and all his companions long sunk in deep sleep. What was there for him to do?

He stood thinking for a long time before he made up his mind. Having no choice he crossed to the other end of the square. He could only do what he always did on cold winter nights.

Finally he was home. He bolted the door and picked his way carefully in the dark over the bodies of his sleeping children, to the top of the mud oven. Inwardly he reproached the fates which had plagued him with six bellies so voracious they could gobble up bricks.

He knew his way in the dark from long habit on cold winter nights. And when he found his woman he didn't nudge her. He took her hand and began to crack her knuckles one by one, and to rub against her feet, caked with tons of dirt. He tickled her roughly, sending a shiver down her sleeping bulk. The woman stirred with the last curse he called on Tantawi's head. She heaved herself over and asked nonchalantly through a large yawn what the man had done to deserve being cursed in the middle of the night. Abd al-Kerim muttered, cursing whoever drove him to do this, as he fumbled with his clothes preparing for what was about to be.

Months later the woman came to him once again to announce the birth of a son. His seventh. He condoled with himself over this belated arrival. All the bricks of the earth would never fill up this one either.

And months and years later, Abd al-Kerim was still stumbling on swarms of brats littering the lanes, tumbling about in all directions and getting in his way as he came and went. And every night, with hands behind his back, catching the wind on his long hooked nose, he still wondered what pit in heaven or earth kept throwing them up.

Translated by Wadida Wassef

You Are Everything to Me



All was quiet. The only sound came from the primus stove like the persistent wailing of a sickly child. It was interrupted at intervals by the noise of the metal tumbler dragging on the tile floor of the bathroom, then the sound of water gurgling out of it, and the crackling of the tin can where the water boiled. The sounds clashed and darted about like bats under the low ceiling of the room until at last the primus gave a last gasp and was silent.

It was a long time before the bathroom door opened and Ramadan heard his wife clatter in on her wooden clogs, her familiar breathing pervading the room. The clogs kept clattering up and down and the light from the lamp flickered as the sad low murmur of the woman rose and fell. Ramadan kept his eyes shut. He opened them only when he felt drops of water splash on his face. He stiffened a little at the sight of his wife standing disheveled with the wooden comb in her hand. She was digging it into her kinky hair, making long deep furrows as she pulled. Her plump face was puckered and there were wrinkles on the sides of her flat nose. She worked at the thick coils, the water splashing about in every direction, wetting her clean cotton dress with the huge faded flowers.

‘Why don’t you take care with that water, woman,’ said Ramadan as he shifted on the bed and shut his eyes again. ‘You’ll break the lamp.’

He paid no attention to what she mumbled but turned over and settled down to sleep. As he pulled the quilt over his shoulder he opened his eyes a little to steal a look at his wife who was just turning off the lamp with a radiant smile on her clean face. The wrinkles had disappeared for the time being. A little tremor ran through Ramadan's body as he snapped his eyes shut. He had long known the meaning of that smile on Thursday nights.*

The four-poster shook as the woman climbed up and slipped under the covers. A strong female odor, mingled with that of cheap soap and the cotton nightdress, pervaded the intimate world under the quilt. Ramadan gave a laborious cough which he made long and deliberate.

'What's the matter?' asked his wife in a meek voice. 'You sure Sayyed is not awake?' she added after a while, in a conspiratorial tone. When she got no reply she gave a sigh which she seemed to draw from the inner coils of her soul while the bed posts shook again and she heaved herself over to place herself within the warm radius of his body. The man was breathing quickly and the hot gusts of his breath bore her off to bowers of bliss, crushing her to the marrow. She stretched a hand and touched his moist forehead, then slid it down to his fat neck where the veins stood out.

'Bless you, my dear. God keep and bless you, love,' she said in a voice like the mewling of a hungry cat. Ramadan forced himself to cough again, groaning through his clenched teeth, and the four-poster shook once more as he turned and showed her his back.

That wasn't the first time he had turned his back, or coughed, or groaned through his clenched teeth. He couldn't remember how many months ago his trouble had started. Whether it was before or after the small Bairam.** A thick fog veiled the beginning of it all. He had never given the matter a thought, nor did he dream that what had happened that day would lead him to this. Just like his neighbor from next door, the bus-driver, Si Ahmed, who couldn't have known that the fever which had seized his little girl would end in a procession of mourners filing into his house.

* Friday is the Muslim day of rest.

** The small Bairam is the three-day feast following the month of Ramadan.

He had attributed what happened to a chill he had caught. When the effects of the cold had gone and he found he was recovering his strength he decided to sleep with his wife that same night. The prospect cheered him up, and he went to take his position in the public square where he was on duty considerably elated, humming the only tune he knew. Cars stopped as usual at the signal of his powerful hand in its worn white glove. He stood erect in his close-fitting uniform, with the brass buttons pulled tightly over his paunch making it look like a huge watermelon. The paint shining on his cap failed, however, to conceal the grime and the signs of long wear. With his stubby pencil he diligently took the numbers of offending cars with the confidence of one who has no fear of the past, the present, or the future. He jotted them down neatly in his clear handwriting of which he was very proud. The world was fine, and he was on top of it. He ruled it with his whistle, exalting whom he wished and humbling whom he wished with merely a sign from his gloved hand.

As he wrote out his first summons for the day in his mind he was already romping in the pastures of bliss that were promised for the coming night, when he intended to shake off the dullness of that week of illness. But the cares of the day and the busy flow of traffic which he controlled from under the rim of his cap took his mind off the matter for a while and he remembered again only when he got home. He had thrown his tired body on the divan and was struggling to pull off his heavy uniform boots.

‘Here, let me,’ said his wife as she squatted on the floor to help him. Her soft hand went round the calf of his leg and the tip of his shoe dug between her breasts, which reminded him of the romp he had in mind and he began to tickle her with his foot while she leaned back and giggled and pushed him away. Then she rolled on her side, tightening her grip round his calf. He enjoyed the game and thrilled to the woman’s voice as she squealed with pleasure, half of her willing, half of her holding back, and all of her tingling with desire.

Though a fog veiled the beginning, Ramadan could remember that night clearly. Every minute he had struggled, soaking in streams of sweat, shutting off his mind to the entire world until he and his wife and the bed were all that existed.

She pushed him from her again and again, and he damned her to hell over and over, and the struggle went on, halting only when the sleeping boy stirred and resuming when he was heard snoring again, as he drooled down the side of his mouth.

He gave up at dawn, and the woman went to sleep, but not he.

That night went and other nights came and every time he renewed the struggle, fighting desperately for his virility until at last he was forced to give up, saying to himself one morning in a voice he hardly recognized as his own: “‘There is no might or power but in God.’ You’re beaten, man. Finished, washed up.’

Often before, he had avoided his wife at breakfast, but that day he wanted her out of his sight altogether. He could have knocked his head against the wall in his misery. It was a strange thing that was happening to him. The painful struggling every time, and the sweating, and the long nights, should have forced him to admit he was no longer a man. But he could not bring himself to do it. He burned with shame and humiliation just as if he were being paraded through the town sitting naked on a donkey, his head heaped with mud. ‘You’re finished, man; washed up,’ he kept repeating to himself as though he were reciting the *ayah** of The Chair against evil spirits.

He cut himself a big chunk of bread but left it untouched. He got up and stood looking out of the window. Then he spat. A large mouthful which he aimed at the chicken coops on the facing roof-top. He came back and sat down at the eating board, staring at his food without touching it, chewing on his silence until it choked him. Then he got up again and slipped on his clothes, feeling his body dissolve and his limbs melt into nothing as he stole out of the house.

Standing in the middle of the square where cars milled around him and heaven and earth moved and only he stood dazed and fixed in his place, he suddenly realized the triviality of this kingdom that was his. The white gloves bothered him. His cap weighed on his head like a millstone. All day he did not trouble to write down one summons. And why should he? The

* A verse from the Qur’an.

world could go to hell for all he cared. He wasn't there to put it right. Damn the cars and their drivers and the traffic, and everything to do with the crazy shrieking merry-go-round where he stood.

For the first time in his life he hated the thought of his home and the wretched face of his wife, and he was in no hurry to return to either. He slid his cap down his forehead and loosened his belt as he trudged heavily down the street, the grooves in his face overflowing with despair, wishing some vehicle would knock him down and put an end to his misery. At last he reached the door of the only man in town who was a friend to all. He stood there and knocked, a thing he did not do frequently. Tantawi was not astonished. He let him in and made him welcome, asking many questions about his health and his friends and his relatives and his hometown and who had married and who had died and who was still alive. But when Ramadan said, 'Tantawi, boy, I want a whiff,' Tantawi was astonished.

Ramadan was not in the habit of taking much hashish, but that night he took an overdose to the point that Tantawi thought it best to see him home. Ramadan was too dazed to refuse or accept, much less take in his friend's questions about what was troubling him.

As he walked Ramadan wandered far with his mind, delving deep in time and place until he reached Sekina, his neighbor, in the old house by the stream, and the years following his puberty. From time to time he stopped in his tracks for no reason and Tantawi would tug at him and he had to walk on, while his mind still rambled. 'Suppose it works, boy. Suppose hash will do the trick,' he would cry as the sudden thought struck him, and he'd burst out laughing, stopping in his tracks again.

'By the Prophet, he's gone. Quite stoned,' murmured Tantawi with pity for his friend.

Ramadan nearly blurted it all out but caught himself in time and shoved the words back into his dry throat, as his shoes hit the road once more and Tantawi pulled him along by the hand.

Hashish didn't work that time, or any other time.

On the nights when he took it he would remain silent, speaking little, and when he managed to say something it was as if the words had been

sucked out of him like a bad fluid; an acrid mixture of anger, resentment, and mortification. His wife would chatter on in the meantime, even though he hardly moved a muscle. His duty in the square became an agony he was forced to swallow slowly, like the hours he spent there, only half standing. The brisk salute he usually gave to his superiors deteriorated to a half-hearted motion he wrenched from himself like a bad tooth. And all the time he got more and more entangled in a coil of lies he was forced to tell the doctor in order to obtain a day or two of leave.

Normally he never went home without something for his wife. Now she became used to seeing him come with his hands empty and dangling at his sides as if they didn't belong to him.

One day he came home to find his wife's mother had just arrived for a visit. His cool and indifferent greeting made his wife blush, and her vexation reached a peak as the day wore on and his talk with her mother did not go beyond an occasional, 'And how are you?'

Finally, having had enough, the old lady retired to bed after barely going through her evening prayers, moaning and groaning from her rheumatic joints. An hour later he too was stretched out on the straw mat at the foot of the bed together with his wife and son.

He was awakened at dawn when the old lady stumbled on him as she rose to perform her ablutions for the dawn prayer. And while she recited the *Fatihah*,* incorrectly as usual, in her rasping voice, he couldn't help asking himself what in all hell she was doing there.

The answer awaited him in the evening when the Hagga** cleared her throat as she squatted on the floor and leaned her back to the wall, draping herself in her large white veil. 'Well, son, I shall not hide it from you,' she began.

In actual fact she was hiding from him that her daughter had sent her a letter behind his back and she began to put the matter forward with the cunning of old women. She took heart from his silence and went on to play mother and sister and bosom friend.

'And for every problem there is a solution, son, don't you worry,' she said.

* Opening chapter of the Qur'an.

** Title given to a person who has been on a pilgrimage to Mecca. It is the feminine form of 'Hagg.'

‘Problem my foot!’ he fumed inwardly. ‘Solution my arse!’ he raged. ‘What business is it of yours? And what brings you here in the first place, you crumpled-up old witch?’ The curses he sought to pour out but which he was forced to hold back stoked his fury all the more for until that moment his wife had nothing to do with his problem. She existed nowhere in that vast wilderness where he staggered alone. Now it was obviously no longer his concern alone, and God knows who else was in on it too.

The evening ended with a tremendous conflagration which overturned the eating board and blew out the lamp, and the neighbors heard it crash to the floor as he roared, ‘By God, you will not sleep under my roof!’

The Hagga and her daughter were given shelter by the neighbors that night; and by daybreak the train was carrying the mother back to her village alone. And had there been room in her brother’s house for her daughter too, she would not have left her behind.

At that same hour Ramadan was stealing out of their lane. When he met Abu Sultan, his greeting was curt and he avoided his eyes, hurrying along, the sooner to get out of sight. It was the same with Abd al-Razek, the newspaper boy, and Hagg Muhammad who sold beans, and everyone else he knew or did not know. Every movement betrayed his secret; every word was a calculated jab; in every smile he saw irony. Everybody knew; even the fellow near him clutching at the ceiling-strap in the train: when their eyes met, it was evident that he knew.

He darted to the center of the square wishing miserably that his body would shrink and disintegrate and vanish out of sight. Standing there in the middle was like being on display in a showcase open to the curious gaze of the crowds whose only wish was to expose him. When he failed to protect himself from their prying looks he vented his fury on the people, dealing out summonses with a heavy hand, muttering obscenities, and dragging more than one victim to the police station on the slightest provocation.

It was a sad man who stood there every day from now on. Glum, unsmiling, his face dark and lined behind the bushy mustache he no longer bothered to trim. His area became one of dread, and he became the scourge of drivers going through. Everyone knew the dark cop with the bushy mustache. His

bad temper, his biting tongue, and his aversion to women drivers, particularly those crossing his square, were proverbial.

And then there was his wife.

He had worn himself out, fretting about her. Where was she that day he went home and didn't find her? She said she'd gone to Umm Hamida's whose brother was Mehanni—that boy who dressed in ironed silk caftans which clung to his thighs, and wore his skull-cap tilted at an angle. What was she doing at Umm Hamida's? And the day he caught her looking out of the window with her head uncovered. The bitch. With her head uncovered!

By and by he took to coming home late at night after he became a regular knocker on Tantawi's door. One night, after he had undressed and got into his white gallabiya, fixing his woolen cap firmly on his head, he stretched his weary drugged body on the bed while the voices of the day hummed in his ear and Tantawi's talk flickered on his memory. When the humming ceased and Tantawi faded out he realized his wife was still awake, sobbing bitterly. Ramadan that night had reached the end of his tether. The solid barrier he had placed between them was slowly eroding with her tears until only the quilt remained. He lay still, listening in silence, unable to do anything else. Finally he spoke.

'Just tell me, Naima, what is there I can do?' he asked, every fiber in him crying out in pain.

She only buried her head deeper in the pillow and sobbed louder. He shook her gently, with humility, and asked her again. Not that he expected her answer to help him much. He was simply trying somehow to cover up his failure, or at least to get someone to help him find a way out.

He began to look around to see how others in his predicament acted. He consulted the writings of old. He went to the wise and learned, he visited the shrine of every holy man in town, and he ate the pigeons and mangoes provided by Naima out of her own savings. He sucked the acid tops of sugar cane and he swayed to the beat of the tambourine when a *zar** was held in

* Ceremony for casting out devils.

his honor. Many times he was up at dawn in order to throw the charms written for him into the sea. Obediently he ate the pies his wife baked him, kneaded with her own blood, and he drank all the potions the herbalist concocted specially for him.

Nothing worked.

Then he made his way to the VD hospital, and there amongst the rows of patients waiting their turn he met many others like himself. There was comfort in being with them. The canvas bag which Naima had sewn was filled and refilled with bottles of medicine which he dutifully swallowed. His veins and muscles were pricked with hypodermics, and he was admitted for treatment and discharged. His mother-in-law paid them another call, and the money she brought was spent and much more besides. Night and day she kept on pouring out advice, and so did relatives and the relatives of relatives.

Ramadan went on desperately in pursuit of his lost virility, looking everywhere, following every lead. All his thoughts, all his actions centered on that one goal. It was his sole topic: at prayers on Friday, and at the café; at the fish market and the railway station; with the male nurse from the hospital and even with his commanding officer; and still nothing changed.

They were talking quietly one day, Ramadan and Naima, sitting lazily in a spot of sunshine on the roof. Conversation flowed gently; Ramadan was relaxing on his day off, and Naima, having bought the sardines for lunch early that morning, had given herself up to the luxury of doing nothing. Ramadan was speaking in the gentlest tone for he had been giving a good deal of thought to his wife, and he was blaming himself for much of what was on his mind. He had chosen that day and that hour to unburden himself.

‘Listen, Naima,’ he began. He hesitated for an instant then gathered up his courage and went on.

‘I . . . I want to do what’s right in the sight of God.’

She looked at him languidly. The shadow of a smile, playing on her face, was about to break at his stumbling speech.

‘I . . . I think it would be better if I divorced you, Naima,’ he blurted out at last.

At this she sat up sharply and turned to face him. She beat her breast with her hand and looked at him with eyes full of reproach.

‘Ramadan! For shame! What is this you’re saying! You are everything to me,’ she exclaimed with indignation, ‘father and brother; the crown upon my head. I am not worth the ground under your feet. I am only your servant, my love. How could you say such a thing! After my hair’s turned gray, and yours too. . . It’s not as if we’re young any more . . . how could you . . .’ A gush of tears stopped the words in her mouth and she couldn’t continue. She unfastened her head-kerchief and wiped her tears with it as she got up and stumbled downstairs, leaving Ramadan behind, absently passing his fingers over the wrinkles on his face. He smoothed his balding head and passed his hands across his bloated belly. Absently he plucked at the hairs of his leg, most of them turned white, as his eyes strayed to Sayyed, his son.

He gazed at the boy as if he had just discovered him.

Sayyed was lying near him, his face covered with his arithmetic copy-book. Wide-eyed and incredulous Ramadan was devouring the boy with his eyes. God almighty! How could he forget he had a son, and think only of himself in this whole wide world?

‘Sayyed . . . Sayyed, my boy, come over here,’ he whispered hoarsely. ‘Come, sit here by me . . . let me look at you. My, but you’ve grown, son. You’re almost as big as I am. You’ll be a man, soon . . . a man! And I’ll have you married . . . that’s right, I’ll have you married to a beautiful girl. No . . . four! Four beautiful girls, and you’ll be their man, son. Do you understand? Do you understand what it means to be their man? Never mind. You will, you will. And you’ll have children. Do you hear? You’ll have children, Sayyed, and I’ll carry your little ones in my arms. These arms of mine . . . do you hear me, son . . .?’

Translated by Wadida Wassef

The Errand



Whenever anyone mentioned Cairo in his presence al-Shabrawi got terribly upset. It made him feel cheated of his life and he would suddenly long to go back if only to spend one hour at al-Kobessi or Mo‘allem Ahmed’s in the quarter of al-Tourgouman. His memory took him back to the days when he was a conscript and he used to go the length and breadth of Cairo every week, and he would hanker for one of those daytime shows he used to attend at the National Cinema. He sighed bitterly every time, for it was not too much to ask God to arrange for the proper circumstances and a little money to make his wish come true. ‘I’ll give my life for one hour in Cairo,’ he never tired of saying.

But he didn’t have to go to quite that extreme for things looked up unexpectedly, all of a sudden, and his wish came to be realized in a way he least suspected. One day as he was sitting in his usual place at the police station, as he had for the past four years, a large crowd of people suddenly came barging in. After many questions and in spite of the racket, he was able to make out that they were bringing in a mad woman from Kafr Goma‘a accompanied by her relatives and friends. Everyone was yelling at once as more and more people kept coming in, attracted by the noise, until the place was in an uproar.

A beam of hope made his heart flutter. Obviously the woman would have to be sent to the asylum in Cairo with a special escort, and he couldn’t think of anyone better qualified for the task than himself.