

**BALANCE THROUGH RESISTANCE: THE  
NOVELS OF TAWFIQ AL-HAKIM**

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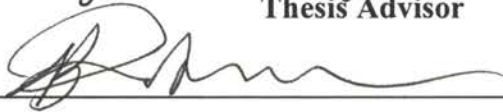
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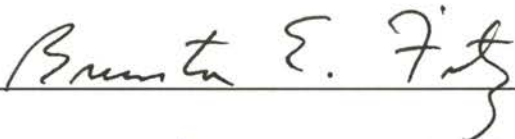
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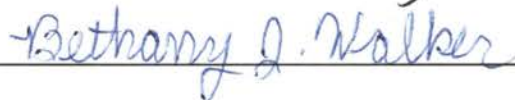
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## PREFACE

The initial impulse for the research and translation presented here was my delight in Tawfiq al-Hakim's novel *Maze of Justice* when I was in high school and my consequent admiration for its author. I still recall how his dark humor and sarcasm made me burst into laughter. I have thought of him ever since as a humorist, until only a few years ago, when I began to detect another important dimension in his writings. That new dimension turned out to be philosophical. Al-Hakim appears to believe that all humans are naturally equipped with a certain faculty with which they can develop, when oppressed, a sort of compensatory strength which helps them resist hegemony and domination by other forces and, necessarily, "balance" the otherwise tipped scale. In his four major novels, al-Hakim shows his characters ways to use this faculty to empower themselves and compensate for their vulnerability and weakness.

This thesis examines the above philosophical trait in al-Hakim's four novels: *Return of the Spirit*, *Bird of the East*, *Maze of Justice*, and *The Sacred Bond*. In addition, it offers the first English translation of the fourth novel along with a full treatment of the way this novel fits within the context of the literary history of Egypt and within the context of the emerging Egyptian feminism of the 40's and the early 50's. The thesis concludes with an assessment of al-Hakim as an artist.

Since the main subject of examination in the four novels mentioned above is the process through which al-Hakim mediates different conflicts, I found it necessary to look

for autobiographical and biographical materials in order to determine who and what shaped the author's mind, and to what extent his social, political, and literary milieu informed his thought. Al-Hakim's autobiography, *The Prison of Life*, which covers his early years, and *Zahrat al-Umr (The Bloom of Life)*, a collection of letters written by him to his French friend, André, were the primary sources. Unfortunately, I found most of the biographical materials collected by al-Hakim's chief biographer, Adham, to be corrupted and of little help because they were based primarily on al-Hakim's autobiographical fictions. It ought to be noted that the works of Mohamed Mandur and Ghali Shukri are the most objective of all critical studies written in Arabic that I have examined.

My knowledge of the source (Arabic) and target (English) cultures was the basis of my translation. Attending to the cultural contexts from which words and sentences of the source language emerge and which they express, and focusing on the expectations of the audience for whom translation is intended were my two primary considerations when translating *The Sacred Bond*. It goes without saying that awareness of idioms and styles of expression in the two cultures, among other considerations, is a prerequisite for any individual undertaking cultural translation. Fortunately, I have been exposed to the two cultures in question. My job, however, was not as smooth as it might seem, due to the incompatibility of the languages and cultures I was mediating.

Mediation, by definition, is the act of bringing opposing parties closer, and it involves making decisions on the part of the mediator. I may, therefore, take liberty to define translation as the continuous act of making decisions informed by a certain translation theory. The theoretical underpinning of my cultural translation is the space I was able to maintain between two extreme theoretical concepts in the field of translation. Drawing

on the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Lawrence Venuti, one of the most established theorists in the field, exposes the translator to two methods of translation. The first is the “domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home.” The second is the “foreignizing method, an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad” (“Translation as Cultural Politics” 210).

Venuti urges the translator to adopt the latter method.

The problem every translator is faced with, however, is that in order to bring “the author back home” a great deal of the source-language text must be appropriated and immersed in the common usage and metaphors inherent in the target language. It is true the work will read better, sound like the ordinary language of the target culture, and be more publishable, but at what expense? Meanwhile, if the translator is to send “the reader abroad,” he/she is sure to face another problem, for how many readers will be willing to “board the plane” knowing that they will lose the stylistic aspects of their native tongue like sentence boundaries and short paragraphs (as native speakers of English are accustomed to)? Nonetheless, Venuti’s foreignizing theory is a liberating theory in that it seeks to free the translator from the constraints and tyranny of the target-language dominant poetics and norms, thus opening a new space for new ideas and innovations.

Just as Venuti thinks of translation as a form of “violence,” because maintaining “foreignness” in the target-language text disrupts that language’s norms, Philip Lewis speaks of the need to translate certain texts abusively. Lewis’s “abusive” theory of translation respects the common usages neither of the target-language nor of the source-

language. Following Jacques Derrida, whose attack on the dominant poetics and privileged metaphors of the language forms the basis for his concept of deconstruction, Lewis suggests that a bad translation takes place when the translator has a great reverence for the language and its traditional metaphors. He believes that difficult source-language texts, that themselves abuse the language, ought to be deconstructed when translated. Texts like those of lyric poetry can be simplified for the target reader after liberating the language in which they were written from its metaphorical usage. Translation, Lewis insists, must “produce its own” version of the original.

Like Derrida who emphasizes the reader before the text and who interprets texts through the spaces left by the way linguistic icons (words) operate, Lewis seeks to produce a translated text that is free from the linguistic burden of the original and is easy to read for the target reader. In this sense, Lewis’s “abusive” translation theory shows just how literary and translation theory share the same linguistic mode of thought.

Although Douglas Robinson acknowledges that Lewis’s insistence on the necessity of the translator to produce his/her own text “liberates translators from the dual jail cells of fidelity to the source-language text and communication with the target-language reader,” (*What Is Translation* 134), he still poses questions like: who is the victim of abuse in such a translation experience? Is it the target-language reader or the source-language text or both?

I found Lewis’s theory of creating one’s own text when translating to be too liberal for an objective translation and sought instead to strike a balance between Venuti’s two theoretical extremes, between fidelity to the source-language text and producing a text compatible with those of the target language as can be. I, therefore, “foreignized” when

I needed to be faithful to the source-language text and to its author. For example, the word “beret” in the first paragraph of the first chapter is the English translation of the Arabic word “qulinsoah,” which could be translated to “hat” or “cap” as well. But I chose “beret,” although it is not a household word in the English-speaking culture, because wearing a beret, not a cap, is unique to al-Hakim and to the Monk-Philosopher character who is said to resemble him. Furthermore, I yielded to the formal tone of original text whenever I felt that making the formal informal for the contemporary reader would sacrifice the cultural flavor of the original. For example, the words “Madame” and “Miss” used by the Monk-Philosopher throughout the novel are meant culturally to show an attitude of formality on his part towards the wife, who seems to prefer informality both in her actions and conversations. In other words, in order to maintain the tension in the novel between the formal and the informal the translated prose had to remain faithful to the original. In a similar fashion, I did not change al-Hakim’s showy and purple prose as long as it was congruent to the context and, on many occasions, for fear of losing the flavor of the Arabic.

I also called upon “domesticating” strategies to make the unfamiliar more tolerable to contemporary natives of English. I created paragraph breaks wherever I felt they were needed. For example, the second paragraph on page 38 which begins with the word “Nonetheless” was a part of the first paragraph in the original text but I created it to emphasize a narrative shift. I rearranged sentences within paragraphs as well to bring forward topic sentences before the details. This posed quite a challenge for me because of the incompatibility of the Middle-Eastern circular mode of writing and the Western linear one. For example, I brought forward the sentence: “when the Monk-Philosopher

related that the wife was innocent and that what she wrote was no more than fiction” (188) in my translation to meet the expectations of native speakers of English who are used to reading topic sentence before the details even though this sentence occurs much later in the Arabic text. Furthermore, the Arabic word “wa” which means “and” serves to prolong sentences written in Arabic without the need for a period. It is therefore not uncommon for a paragraph written in that language to run for half a page without a period. Accordingly, I rearranged sentence breaks throughout the text to make it more tolerable for the target reader. It must be noted that all the “domesticating” strategies I used in this translation neither changed the meaning nor the flavor of the original text.

Unless otherwise noted, translation of Arabic materials throughout this research is mine. Furthermore, I have chosen to translate the titles of al-Hakim’s books that have not been translated into English and place my translation in parenthesis following their transliterations. In this connection, most transliterations of al-Hakim’s books and other critical materials used here follow the transliteration system of the Library of Congress.

My most profound thanks go to members of my dissertation committee: Dr. Elizabeth Grubgeld for her valuable advice and prompt trouble-shooting; Dr. Brian Evenson for his continuous support; Dr Brewster Fitz for his valuable feedback; Dr. Bethany Walker for reading earlier versions of my translation and helping me with some obscure words; Dr. Samir Ahmed for offering support without regard to his busy schedule. I also would like to thank Dr. Ravi Sheorey for reading an earlier copy of the translation.



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## INTRODUCTION

With an artistic production spanning over five decades including novels, an impressive array of plays, short stories, essays, and philosophical writings, Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987) is considered one of the greatest and most influential figures in contemporary Arabic literature.<sup>1</sup> Al-Hakim's greatness springs from his daring innovation in drama, which caused the genre to be accepted in Egypt in the mid-thirties, and from his everlasting impact on Egyptian novelists who are his juniors. He is possibly the most voluminous twentieth-century playwright in the world, having written more than seventy plays that are viewed by most critics as "intellectual" plays because although enlightening they are difficult to stage.<sup>2</sup> With plays like *The People of the Cave* (1933), *Shahrazad* (1934), and *Fate of a Cockroach* (1966), al-Hakim established himself as the undisputed master of dramatic art in Egypt. As a novelist, he has written only four major novels. Paradoxically, al-Hakim has left his mark on younger novelists more than he has on dramatists,<sup>3</sup> as evident in the work of Naguib Mahfouz.<sup>4</sup>

In his autobiography, *The Prison of Life* (1964), Tawfiq al-Hakim writes:

The tragedy became evident to my eyes one day when I was analyzing myself, and it occurred to me that only a minor proportion of the life I was living was my own, the greater proportion being that mixture, kneaded like dough, of contradictory elements deposited in the generative fluid out of which I was formed. . . . I am a prisoner in what I have inherited, free in what I have acquired. (201)

What was, then, the social, political, and intellectual environment that made up “the greater proportion” of al-Hakim? and to what extent was he imprisoned by it?

Al-Hakim was born in Alexandria, Egypt, to an Egyptian father who worked in the judiciary and a Turkish mother who was a member of the Egyptian Turkish aristocracy and whose family roots may have been Persian.<sup>5</sup> Due to the social superiority of the Turks in Egypt at the time, the relationship between the couple was very much defined right from the outset: she was the boss. She took upon herself the job of “civilizing” her husband by acquainting him with her people and detaching him from his own. She made no secret of her superiority. Al-Hakim tells us that “she constantly used to tell [him], I am cleverer than your father. I’m quicker in understanding than your father!” (*The Prison of Life* 26). But as Ismail Adham notes in his biography of al-Hakim, the husband, Ismail al-Hakim, was not as naïve as many may take him to be, for he knew exactly the sort of conveniences that marriage was to offer him: social status along with three hundred acres of rich land his wife was to bring into it.<sup>6</sup>

As a child, al-Hakim had more than his fair share of harsh treatment at the hands of his mother. She prevented him from playing with peasants’ children because they were socially beneath him, and was determined, against his wishes, to send him to his elementary school in a horse-drawn carriage, as a way of distinguishing him from other pupils.<sup>7</sup> Al-Hakim narrates an incident very telling of his mother’s lack of tenderness: “Still clinging to my memory is the image of a small red basket containing fruit that was always by her bedside, for a breakfast of fruit had been prescribed for her. I used to steal glances at these fruits and my mouth watered at the sight of them, but I was not allowed to approach them: I was told they were some kind of medicine” (*The Prison of Life* 42-

43). He narrates in the same book that his mother, who was fond of candy, used to tell him that the sweets were prescribed for her, and when he outstretched his hand for her to give him some, she gave him a little and told him to go to hell (45).

Although an educated man and a respected judge, al-Hakim's father was probably as backward as many Egyptian peasant farmers of the time as far as the method he employed to raise his son is concerned. He was often impatient and inattentive.

Although al-Hakim is very much appreciative of his parents in general, he emphasizes throughout his autobiography that his upbringing at the hands of his father continued to work to his disadvantage for the rest of his life. He tells us that one day his father, who loved poetry, asked him to read poetry aloud. And when he did, the father stopped him and inquired about the meaning of a certain word. For his bad luck, al-Hakim couldn't come up with the right answer, so his father slapped him, causing his nose to bleed. Al-Hakim reflects on the incident: "It would have been natural and logical for me to have loved poetry as my father did, but my nosebleed made me hate it for a long time—how could I love it then when blood had been shed between us?" (*The Prison of Life* 72).

Most probably, it was the lack of parental love which unconsciously made young al-Hakim choose "love" for a subject, when asked by his Arabic composition teacher to go up to the chalkboard and write a subject to talk about in class.<sup>8</sup>

Adham believes that the harsh treatment al-Hakim received at an early age at the hands of his parents and his consequent detachment from them have shaped the writer's "pattern" of thinking for years to come. According to the critic, al-Hakim's childhood was full of abstract thoughts, which he developed in his mind to counteract the strict system imposed on him by his parents.<sup>9</sup> This may very well be true, given the

contemplative nature of al-Hakim as an adult. In *Fann al-Adab (The Art of Literature)*, al-Hakim testifies to Adham's finding: "I did not get all that I was eager to have of toys and things, so I created them myself through my passionate imagination" (270).

As a grown man, he preferred loneliness to company and contemplation to conversation. In *Himar al-Hakim (Al-Hakim's Donkey)*, he tells us that one day, after considerable begging on the part of a French movie director, he accepted a dinner invitation to discuss the dialogue he was writing for an Egyptian documentary film with some French nationals. But when he got there, he avoided contact with guests, preferring to sit by himself instead. When a female guest asked him whether he always liked to be alone, he replied that he was "predestined" to be so (128). In *Maze of Justice*, the public prosecutor, who resembles al-Hakim when the latter worked in the judiciary, explains why he prefers seclusion:

By nature I am fitted to be a hidden observer of people strutting across the stage of life—rather than to be skilled actor flooded with limelight under the eyes of an audience. For such situations dazzle and unbalance me so that I lose my memory and am deprived of that inner calm wherewith the deeper issues can best be observed. (77)

Furthermore, al-Hakim was never comfortable with the politicians and intelligentsia of his time and did his best to turn down all sorts of invitations, the most notable of which was that of Nasser,<sup>10</sup> because, as he wrote later in *'Awdat al-Wa'y (Return of Consciousness)*, he couldn't utter the kind of flattery Nasser wanted to hear. Al-Hakim refused to belong to any political party because, as he wrote in *Malamih Dakhiliya (Inner Features)*, political parties assigned a secondary role to intellectuals. But he insisted that

“The isolation” he “promoted was from politicians not from politics” (153).

Accordingly, all of the solutions offered to the many social and political problems he dealt with in his writings were not the result of many lively debates on his part, but rather of his ideal analysis while sitting at his desk. Up until the last day of his life, he was referred to as the unsociable man living in an ivory tower.

In addition to his unsociability and the inconveniences it brought upon him, the accusation of being a misogynist put him on the defensive for almost all his life. But his was an unenthusiastic and careless defense, to say the least. It may be true that his early troubled upbringing and his less-than-smooth relationship with his mother contributed to igniting his critics’ opinions about his hatred of women. “Woman’s foe,” was the title he was first endowed with in 1935 by Hoda Sharawy, the leader of the feminist movement in Egypt at the time. But his troubles with women in general had begun when he objected to the “unveiling” of modern Egyptian women, believing that it would endanger traditional family values, as stressed in his play *Modern Woman* (1923), which was apparently a parody of Qasim Amin’s book, *Al-Mar’a al-Jadida (The New Woman)*.<sup>11</sup> He later abandoned his position and called the play the most ridiculous piece of drama he had ever written (*Malamih Dakhiliya* 291). But it was probably too late for him to clear his reputation, even with the peace he attempted to make with Sharawy, whom he asked to recommend a future wife. But when Sharawy came up with the name of a feminist activist, he hesitated to marry her on the grounds that the proposed wife might turn his house into a conference on woman’s rights.<sup>12</sup> Later, when he was forty-six, he met and married a woman on his own.

But the attack on him did not stop with his marriage. The Egyptian critic, Mohamed Shusha, notes that al-Hakim was married for thirty-three years, during which he never uttered to his wife the magical words: I love you.<sup>13</sup> Al-Hakim did not deny it but insisted that he loved her in his own way. He consistently stressed the need for the modern Egyptian woman to be enlightened and argued that the real feminine beauty is that of the mind.<sup>14</sup> But his message of admiration for the intellectual woman did not resonate well with woman activists because of his failure to acknowledge the role of women as a group as did Qasim Amin some fifty years earlier. While Amin advocated women's education so that women could participate in daily activities on an equal basis with men, al-Hakim seems to limit their role to domestic matters: raising attractive and healthy children and taking care of the disadvantaged in the Egyptian rural areas. Thus al-Hakim concentrated only the "social" function of women's education and ignored Amin's call for the kind of political and economic change women could make in the workplace.

There were other reasons that made al-Hakim an easy target for critics of both sexes as well. First, because al-Hakim is probably the first Arab writer whose writing is informed by philosophical convictions, or rather tensions, for he was yet to settle many philosophical issues, he was contradictory at times and vague on some issues at other times, which may have made him an easy prey. Furthermore, al-Hakim has not been known as a good defender of himself. He preferred silence to speech, to the extent that he befriended his walking stick because it was, as he put it, the quietest friend he ever had. He even wrote a book about it (*Al-Hakim's Stick*, 1954). But, as many evidences suggest, his silence has backfired on him and allowed rumors to settle down as truth.

Although al-Hakim has been careful since his early days as a writer to draw a line between politics and matters of intellect, he eventually realized that the two could not be separated, at least in Egypt. In fact, one cannot remember a period in modern Egyptian history when the intellectual movement followed so closely developments in political thought as the period during which al-Hakim matured as a writer. The political landscape of Egypt during the inter-war period was rapidly changing. Egypt, then under the British occupation, was caught in the middle of warring parties with nothing to gain except the replacement of one Western occupier with another. The British commanders who were stationed in the country recruited Egyptians to fight side by side with British soldiers, and Egypt provided most of the supplies needed by the army. This raised anti-British feeling among many Egyptians, who were losing patience with Britain's chain of broken promises to grant the country its independence. The Egyptian animosity toward the British was ignited by the retaliatory action taken by the latter to exile Sa'd Zaghlul, the outspoken and popular Egyptian politician. In 1919 Egyptians reacted by taking to the streets, attacking and burning government buildings throughout the country.<sup>15</sup> The most significant outcome of the 1919 Revolution was that it marked the first time in modern history that Egyptians rallied around a common cause.<sup>16</sup> M. E. Yapp sums up the impact of the 1919 Revolution on Anglo-Egyptian relationship: "British control of Egypt was seen to rest on Egyptian consent and willingness to co-operate, and that consent and co-operation were apparently withdrawn in 1919 and never restored" (*The Making* 345).

Echoes of nationalism and patriotism found their way into literature, as evident in al-Hakim's first classic novel, *Return of the Spirit*, which, according to Hutchins, "is a celebration of a significant Egyptian uprising and an exhortation to the nationalist



solidarity of all levels of Egyptian society” (Introduction 3). Even before the appearance of al-Hakim’s novel, the realistic materials offered to writers by the Revolution put the dominant romanticism of the time in jeopardy. Thus, the romantic writings of al-Manfalouti and the New York writers of Arabic origin like Gibran Khalil Gibran gave way to a more analytical and realistic mode of writing, championed by Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayid<sup>17</sup> and Mohamed Taimur (1892-1921), a realistic playwright and founder of an analytical school similar to that of al-Sayid. Taimur’s plays such as *Al-Ufuf fi al-Qafas* (*Bird in the Cage*) and *Al-Hawiah* (*The Abyss*) proved rich both in their domestic subject matter and artistic treatment. In 1925, Mahmud Taimur excelled in short story writing through his imitation of the texture of ordinary domestic life in a Chekhov-like style. His first volume, titled *Al-Sheikh Gum ‘a*, (*Sheikh Gum ‘a*) and the many volumes that followed established him as the father of the Egyptian short story. Tahir Lashin (b. 1894), who reached his literary peak with the publication of the realistic novel *Hawa bila Adam* (*Eve without Adam*), was another member of the Taimurian school.<sup>18</sup>

Just as Egypt was searching for its independence, intellectuals were searching for the independence of their minds by questioning old values, Islamic and otherwise. In the mid-thirties, the tension was always there between religious conservatives, who believed that Islam is a self-sufficient religion capable of regulating society, and secular writers like Lutfi al-Sayid, Haikal, and Taha Husain, who looked to the West for democratic ideals. The moderates, or the late followers of Mohamed Abdu,<sup>19</sup> debated the issues of the time on the pages of *Al-Siyasah* while Muslim conservatives made Al-Azhar<sup>20</sup> their haven. In 1925, moderates and conservatives clashed when Ali Abd al-Raziq wrote *Al-*

*Islam wa Usoul al-Hukm (Islam and the Principles of Government)*, in which he implies that Islam is incapable of regulating a modern state. Muslim fundamentalists wasted no time expressing their outrage and attacking the author, causing him to lose his job in the process.<sup>21</sup> On the literary level, al-Mazini and al-Aqqad published *Al-Diwan (The Divan)*, a classical attack on conventional poetic criticism as embodied by the work of Hafiz Ibrahim and Ahmed Shawqi, the two respected poets of the time.<sup>22</sup>

The inter-war period witnessed some developments in women's education as well. A look back at women's education in Egypt prior to World War I shows that during the last several decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only elementary education was available to girls through English and French missionary girls' schools, in addition to a number of native girls' schools which were modeled to some extent on these foreign schools. By 1910 girls in Egypt were permitted access to secondary education, and it wasn't until the 1920's that women were admitted to universities.<sup>23</sup> But in general, college education was still limited to middle and upper-class women who were free from the economic difficulties associated with women of the lower class.

At this time of political, religious, literary, and social change in Egypt, young al-Hakim was in his senior year in law school. But his attention was mainly directed towards the theater. While in college, he wrote some plays (e.g., *The Groom* and *The Seal of Solomon*) but advertised them under the pseudonym Husain Tawfiq because of fear of his parents who, like the majority of people then, didn't hold playwrights in high regard. He regularly attended rehearsals, not only of his plays but of others as well. He finally graduated, but not without difficulty. The next year (1925), his father took him to see Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayid, then a former colleague of the father, for professional

guidance. But al-Hakim had already settled his future long before that: he wanted to quit law and devote his life to literature. When he expressed his wish to al-Sayid, the latter objected on the grounds that one couldn't make a living by writing alone and that obtaining a government job was necessary for him to secure his future. Al-Sayid's objection was based on his own unsuccessful experience, for he had quit his job in the judiciary and became a political essayist, a move he later regretted. In his autobiography, written some forty years later, al-Hakim reflects on the whole experience: "The fact is that literature and a career solely in it were not taken seriously in a society that gave respect, prestige, and wealth only to Pashas<sup>24</sup> or to men of authority and position in government, in management, and in the judiciary" (*The Prison of Life* 187). It was decided, then, that young al-Hakim should keep to his field of study and go to France to earn a doctorate in law.

Once in Paris, al-Hakim was immersed in reading books of all branches of knowledge—except law. He read extensively in science, philosophy, and literature and spent most of his time in museums, symphony halls and theaters. He particularly appreciated the artistic talents of Ibsen, Shaw, Pirandello, Maeterlink, Wilde, Poe, Cocteau, and Gide and was overwhelmed by the classical music of Western composers, especially Beethoven.<sup>25</sup> In the introduction to his play, *Ya Tali' al-Shajara* (*The Tree Climber*), he notes that it was his extensive reading of Shaw, Ibsen, and Pirandello which directed him to write the kind of intellectual plays for which he became known (12-17). He was interested in Greek drama as well as he indicated in his preface to *Praxagora*, a play based on a comedy by Aristophanes. In the preface, al-Hakim urges the reader to first read the Greek text if he or she is to save time in learning the correct art of drama

(8). Although he tells us that the intellectual atmosphere in Paris was responsible for diverting his attention from studying law and making him fall in love with different kinds of art at first sight, I find it safe to conclude that the switch was very much decided on long before he reached the shores of France.

A recent scholar has described al-Hakim when he first graduated in 1925:

He was now a young man full of powerful emotions as yet unfocused, very sentimental and idealistic, given to deep and lengthy thought, very attached to his people and his country and bursting with desire to serve, but seeing no opportunity for such service before him; in love with art, with music, feeling a profound need for beauty and bursting with a desire to be an artist, but finding no means of satisfying that desire, not even dreaming of the possibility of one day finding himself in an environment in which art was the principal preoccupation.<sup>26</sup>

This and al-Hakim's own confession to Lutfi al-Sayid that he preferred literature over law help confirm my conclusion. While in Egypt, al-Hakim never divulged his intention to abandon law once he arrived in France for an obvious reason, namely the financial support he received from his parents, who would not have let him cross the Mediterranean had he informed them of his desire to study literature. This is clear from an angry letter he received from his father near the end of his three-year stay in Paris: because he had failed to earn his degree, he must either return to Egypt or risk having his family allowance cut.<sup>27</sup>

In a country which gave preference to academic degrees over knowledge, al-Hakim was pronounced a failure by his family and most of his friends upon returning to Egypt in 1928. But, as al-Hakim tells us throughout *Zahrat al-Umr (The Bloom of Life)*, the three

years he spent in Europe shaped his artistic talent for years to come. During those short years, he read everything he could get his hands on. In a letter to his French friend, André, on the day he failed his doctorate final exam and was consequently ousted from the program, al-Hakim indicated that he was reading at least a hundred pages a day in literature, philosophy, and other disciplines, and that what he read in a month was as much as one needed for the entire doctorate degree in law.<sup>28</sup> In addition to his impressive breadth of reading, he attended lectures given by famous writers, the most notable being James Joyce.

Shortly after returning to Egypt, he described the literary environment in that country in his third letter to his French friend: "I'm tired of everything, of every person. I have my strong doubts that a country like Egypt will soon have intellectual life. There is no life in Egypt for anyone living for intellect. . . . I see myself in a semi-sleepy world" (*Zahrat al-Umr* 92, 109). And when al-Hakim went to visit a friend upon the former's return from France, he first asked his friend about the status of the Egyptian theater only to hear that "The theater is dead" (*The Prison of Life* 189). But al-Hakim, who "had been to Europe and drunk from the true springs of culture" (165), was about to begin the process of changing the literary face of Egypt.

In his Nobel Prize speech, William Faulkner said that the only thing worth writing about is "the human heart in conflict with itself" (quoted in Frye 121). Indeed, this is what al-Hakim did for almost five decades, wrestling with inner opposing powers and pouring his thoughts on paper. He tells us, "Most of my time is spent sitting motionless, in a constant debate with myself, in constant activity inside my brain, dismantling the universe and putting it together again" (*The Prison of Life* 203). He finally put down his

philosophical thoughts in *At-Ta'aduliyyah (The Concept of Balance)*, in which he insists that in order for the individual to guard against the domination of a particular force he or she must learn how to develop enough resisting power to offset that domination and, necessarily, reconcile opposing forces through strength not weakness.

According to al-Hakim, resistance is inherent in the Egyptians since the dawn of history. Just as the Greeks had wrestled with fate, ancient Egyptians struggled with time by preserving their bodies and making them ready for another life. In an interview with Alfrid Farag, al-Hakim sums up his philosophical thinking by insisting that humans must “resist” all forms of domination so that humans can live. They must resist in order not to be swallowed by more powerful forces, he says. Since “Weakness is not absolute but changes characteristics with time because it contains seeds of strength” (Farag 271), striking a balance between strength and weakness, between victory and defeat, is always feasible, al-Hakim insists. These “seeds of strength” are the reparative or compensatory strength developed by the oppressed to counteract the domination and hegemony of the oppressor. Al-Hakim cites the French resistance to German occupation during WW II as exemplary of a compensatory force at work, and the passivity of the Egyptians towards the dominant regime of Nasser as a classic example of people’s failure to develop compensatory power. Al-Hakim’s philosophy, then, is about self-empowerment and liberation. It is about “reversing defeat, weakness, ugliness, and evil” (Farag 268).

His first novel *Return of the Spirit* (1933), is a resistance novel, in both a postcolonial and philosophical sense. From a postcolonial perspective, al-Hakim “writes back to correct or undo Western hegemony” (Gugelberger 2) in the form of the British occupation of Egypt during the first half of the twentieth century. The novel seeks to

liberate Egyptians from political and cultural oppression by reminding them of their hidden power with which they can compensate for their lack of military readiness. It works to “indict”, to borrow a word from Barbara Harlow, the colonizer by unearthing and pointing out to the natives the danger that lies ahead if the colonizer is not unseated. The compensatory or reparative power needed to counteract the conqueror’s oppression takes many forms in the novel. Sometimes it is national unity, however symbolic, other times it is the resurrection of Egypt’s past by “re-membering,” as Homi Bhabha puts it, or “putting together . . . the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (121). The novel also concerns itself with conditions resulting from “internal colonialization,” such as the ignorance of the Egyptian public and its devastating consequences. Knowledge is emphasized, then, to “undo” the ignorance in which the Egyptians are immersed.

In the novel the protagonist, Muhsin, a high school student who resembles al-Hakim, leaves his rural town and heads for Cairo to live with his paternal uncles and go to school there. They all live, along with two servants, in a tiny flat in one of Cairo’s most populated quarters, Al-Sayida Zainab. Symbolism works as a necessary vehicle in carrying different themes throughout the novel.<sup>29</sup> The narrative begins by stating that “They all came down with influenza at the same time. The doctor called on them. His first glance brought him the amazing information that they were in a single room . . .” (27). It concludes with the same doctor viewing them in a prison hospital ward, after they were taken in by the British for participating in the 1919 uprising: “The doctor entered the ward. He cast his eyes on the folks who were lying down, one next to the other. He looked at their expression and faces and remembered them. He remembered

the ward in their home. He stood there in astonishment for a moment. Then he shouted good-humoredly, ‘Is it you? And here again too, each beside the other; each next to his brother?’” (282). Thus the theme of national unity, symbolized by the togetherness felt by family members, is suggested in the novel as an alternative power to counteract the British who had thought that Egypt was nothing but a spineless body and should remain a British protectorate.

The novel foregrounds knowledge as a tool of resistance. The lengthy scene in which Dr. Hilmi, a retired physician who had been stationed with the Egyptian army in the Sudan, narrates his experience in that country to a group of his retired friends is meant to further a certain point: one must know everything about the world in which one lives. The novel also suggests specialized knowledge, as when Muhsin decided to follow his instinct and specialize in arts instead of science.

Although Muhsin’s decision turned out to be the right one, for he later became the expressive tongue of the rioting crowd, al-Hakim’s position on the issue of science as a tool of resistance remained ambiguous. Al-Hakim, like most of the intellectuals of his time, believed that Europe had the upper hand in the Middle East because of its technological edge. One would expect the novel to promote science as a modern tool of resistance—that is, to urge Egyptians to develop their own scientific advances with which they can resist Western technologically sophisticated colonialism. Yet the only character relating to science in the novel is Abdu, an engineer-to-be. But even Abdu al-Hakim does not paint a good picture of his future because abdu has no choice but to work for the bureaucratic Egyptian government after finishing his training. Why, then, has science not been a part of al-Hakim’s resisting strategy? It is possible that al-Hakim has



acknowledged the scientific limitations of his people and their inability to compete with Europe. If so, then al-hakim is the kind of nationalist who loves his nation and desires to see it free but who is also embarrassed by its backwardness. Or maybe he has simply gone for the easiest of approaches by choosing to stir the nationalist sentiment of the natives instead of arguing for the importance of science, thus confirming Maxime Robinson's words that the "Ideology" of resistance "always goes for the simplest solutions" (5).

The truth is that al-Hakim has thought of science and nationalism as incompatible. In *Sultan al-Zalam (Reign of Darkness)*, he contemplates this incompatibility: "Science and nationalism cannot share common ground for nationalism is the collective selfishness, and selfishness is blind. Whereas science is the unerring insight of the true nature of things" (32). Al-Hakim's view should not surprise anyone, for he is of the opinion that scientific advances, like arts, are the property of the world, not of those who discovered them. Edward Said offers a better explanation as to the side effects of nationalism on science and knowledge in general. The critic asserts that although nationalist movements succeed "in ridding many territories of colonial overlords, they have caused "the great colonial schools" in these territories to shut down and deprived millions of the natives from "grasp[ing] the fundamentals of modern life" (*Culture and Imperialism* 223).

The novel also suggests that the best way for Egyptians to resist British cultural imperialism is to resurrect Egypt's past glories and heritage and to learn from them. In the conversation between the French archaeologist and Mr. Black, the English inspector, the former tells the latter that the difference between Europeans and Egyptians is that "they [the Egyptians] don't know the treasures they possess" (180) and that they "conceal

tremendous spiritual power.” When the inspector inquires about the whereabouts of that power, the French national answers, “In the deep well from which those three pyramids emerged” (181). Romanticizing Egypt’s past is not something new to al-Hakim who has insisted that the two greatest civilizations that ever touched the face of the earth belonged to ancient Egypt and Greece.<sup>30</sup> In fact, al-Hakim is continuing an old tradition of reviving Egypt’s pharaonic past championed by a small secular élite of intellectuals who dominated the Egyptian press during the 1920’s. This élite stressed the historical and cultural identity of Egypt while it downplayed its Islamic status. Members of the élite argued for Egypt’s continuous greatness as the first world civilization. Al-Hakim uses the same rhetoric in the novel by implying that Egypt’s glories do not belong only to its past but also to its present and that the Egyptians whose ancestors were able to amass enough people to build the pyramids can do the same now to liberate their country.

As its title suggests, the novel seeks to reawaken the spirit of the Egyptians and then use it as a tool of resistance. But in a country of political chaos and competing self-serving parties, the most direct way for the artist to unite his people behind a certain cause is to strike a religious and nostalgic chord. Al-Hakim has done exactly that by having the actions in the novel take place in a neighborhood named after Al-Sayida Zainab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Mohamed. The nostalgic tone in the novel comes from the portrayal of the heroine, Saniya, as a “representative of Isis.”<sup>31</sup>

The East-West dichotomy is expanded upon in *Bird of the East* (1938), in which the protagonist, Muhsin, is an Egyptian student living in France to further his academic study. A stark contrast between East and West, between what al-Hakim identifies as Eastern spirituality (the novel is dedicated to al-Hakim’s Patron Saint, Al-Sayida Zainab)

and Western materialism, is to be found throughout the novel and ways of reconciling the two oppositions are not only expressed but emphasized.

Muhsin takes part in two principal relationships in the book. The first one is his love relationship with Suzy, the ticket seller at the Odéon, and the second is his relationship with Ivan, the blue-collar Russian worker. The two weeks during which Suzy went out with Muhsin were designed on her part to make her boyfriend, Henry, jealous and, therefore, bring him back to her. When Muhsin discovered that their relationship was nothing but a “frivolous game that would soon be over” and that he “was only living an absurd and banal comedy” (123), he turned to his Eastern spiritual ideals to save him from Suzy, symbol of selfish Europe, and to offset her domination over him. The spirituality of the East, in the person of Lady Zainab, is called upon by the author as a reparative element by which his hero can calm his anger and survive the humiliating situation. The narrator tells us that every time Muhsin forgets about his “saintly Lady” he gets in trouble, for only she can secure his heart: “Oh yes . . . he had surely forgotten his heavenly protector. Had he felt *Her* hand on his shoulder, Suzy would not have frightened him” (89). Al-Hakim, then, dedicated the book to Lady Zainab for a good reason.

Disappointed yet balanced, Muhsin moved out of the hotel, in which he took residence in a room above Suzy’s, and lodged in the same building with his dying Russian friend, Ivan. Although Muhsin was careful to let the severely sick man rest, Ivan always sought him and enjoyed his company, for Muhsin offered him the opportunity to say what was on his mind before he would part with this world. A single proposition preoccupied the young Russian’s mind: the shattering effect of Europe’s materialistic

civilization on people. He finally decided that he had enough of his host country where “There is no family any more” because “Both husband and wife are at the factory all day,” and where “the era of slavery has come back again” (33). He wanted to leave Europe for a better place; he wanted to head for the East along with Muhsin.

But Muhsin is not willing to pack his suitcase, at least not yet. Although he acknowledges the evil of Europe’s materialistic civilization, Muhsin is far from approving his friend’s plan because he believes that the *new* East is as corrupt as the West. It has become a world where “Easterners hold to these ideas[Western ideas] as though they were basic religious principles” and where “it would be easy to downgrade the message of the Prophets, but impossible to do the same to the message of modern material power” (166-67). Because the once spiritual East has become almost non-existent and the science of modern Europe cannot be underestimated, al-Hakim shows his protagonist ways to work a formula of reconciliation between the two opposing poles, instead of falling blindly into the trap of either one. As Roger Hardy rightly puts it, “Al-Hakim and Hussein and many of their contemporaries believed Europe’s colonial yoke had to be thrown off, but this did not shake their faith in its arts and sciences” (13). European science, then, gives Muhsin the strength he needs to resist being dominated only by Eastern ideals.

Consequently, Muhsin protests to his friend: “It seems to me, Monsieur Ivan, that you may be a little harsh in your judgment of the West. No matter how bad the situation is, Europe has still reached heights in science that have never before been achieved” (163). And elsewhere in the novel, Muhsin wishes for a happy marriage between East and West:

In spite of everything, Muhsin saw the West not as something to reject but

something to incorporate. 'Stripped of its arrogance,' he thought to himself, 'and of its sense of superior self-sufficiency, Western civilization could be the base out of which will emerge Universal Civilization. This Civilization of man, whose location on the surface of the globe will be immaterial, will contain all that is beautiful, useful, and viable in the West and in the East. After all, East and West are really two sides of a single coin that in itself is whole. . . . If these two civilizations could once be united into such a total civilization, man would see the dawn of true peace.' (168)

This idealistic recommendation by al-Hakim's protagonist may seem strange or even naïve to the Western reader. But, as Pierre Cachia remarks, this over-idealization is not unique to al-Hakim; it was more or less the way most Egyptian literary pioneers approached problems. Cachia, one of al-Hakim's translators, sums up the philosophical attitude of such pioneers:

Let us not belittle the achievement of that generation. It is no small matter that its members were open-minded enough to consider and embrace a whole set of new values, or that they had enough drive and conviction to shape the destiny of their nation accordingly. But because they were themselves actuated by lofty idealism, they sought no other motivation for communal action, no other mechanism for the realisation of their ideals. (235)

Referring to Muhsin's proposed happy marriage between East and West, one might argue that the idealism proposed by al-Hakim's hero is more or less the product of that hero's inherited Egyptian romanticism which should disqualify him from being an objective mediator between East and West. Although it may be a technical problem on

al-Hakim's part, it is by no means an ideological one. For six years after the Publication of *Bird*, al-Hakim wrote in *Zahrat al-Umr*: "Every time East and West came into contact with each other, a light illuminating the world was emitted as a result" (107).

Al-Hakim's *Maze of Justice* (1937) is quite a shift for him, for it is his first purely realistic novel and his best by far. After returning to Egypt from the West, al-Hakim worked as a public prosecutor in a provincial town in the Delta of Egypt. During that time he recorded his experience in the form of a twelve-day diary that came to be known as *Yawmiyat Naib fi al-Aryaf* (translated as *Maze of Justice: Diary of a Country Prosecutor*). In it he describes the misery of Egyptian peasants living in the disease-ridden and filthy Egyptian countryside and their struggle with strange governmental laws, which were first adopted from the French legal system by Egyptian officials who lived in Cairo and who probably had never been to where those peasants lived. The problem is that the hero, the public prosecutor, is confronted with two difficult choices: either to sympathize with the villagers and be soft on the implementation of the laws and, consequently, be subject to question by his superiors or to put the laws into practice regardless of their unsuitability for the place and for its inhabitants.

Al-Hakim seeks to strike a balance between these two opposing situations. He does so by exposing to his reader the absurdity of the laws and their lack of fitness to regulate people's lives. He creates a social comedy in which we are told that the judge presiding over the provincial court comes from Cairo by train and cares more about finishing the court session in time for him to catch the train back home than about justice. The narrator tells us that the district attorney demands at least a twenty-page report on any murder because of the seriousness of it. A man about to die of poisoning was questioned

for hours by authorities, who cared more about filling out the appropriate forms than saving his life. Another woman was fined for washing her family clothes in an irrigation creek, although it was the only source of water in the village. Furthermore, the *mamur* (police chief) is directed by his superiors in the city to sway election results in favor of the ruling party. Al-Hakim uses black humor and to show the extent to which the entire political system is corrupted. Here is how the police chief explains his neutrality in general elections: “Complete freedom. I let people vote as they like—right up to the end of the election. Then I simply take the ballot box and throw it in the river and calmly replace it with the box which we prepare ourselves” (112).

P. H. Newby claims that “Even the Public Prosecutor in *Maze of Justice*, sensitive and liberal as he is, succumbs to the system of which he is a part.”<sup>32</sup> Nothing can be farther from the truth, for the protagonist’s disgust with law enforcement officials and the laws themselves is not only implied but flatly expressed. It is the unfairness and inappropriateness of the laws and the cruelty of the officials that gives the public prosecutor the strength with which he resists the very system of which he is a part. He refuses to approve of the mastery of the government through its cruel laws over the poor peasants, simply because these laws were not drafted for them. The narrator tells us that “[T]hese procedures which we follow in legal work in accordance with up-to-date regulations really ought to take account of the intelligence of these people and the extent of their mental attainments. The only alternative is to raise their mentality to the level of our laws!” (101). Al-Hakim is being sarcastic here, for he is aware that it is almost impossible to broaden the horizon of such peasants, ignorant and neglected as they are.

The only other alternative is that the laws and procedures ought to be changed if the peasants are to be protected by their government, not humiliated by it.

Unhappy with the justice system and with his career in the judiciary, al-Hakim quit his post and decided to specialize as a writer. *Al-Ribat al-Muqaddas (The Sacred Bond, 1944)* was thus the first novel in the Egyptian literary history to be written by a professional writer. A quick review of the history of the novel in Egypt will show that fiction was not among literary genres in that country before the turn of the century; that writers who sketched novels before al-Hakim were not primarily novelists but people who worked in journalism; that after the admittance of the genre the issue of readership threatened its continuity because people, even the educated, looked down on it; and that none of the novelistic techniques were invented by Egyptian writers but rather adopted from European ones, particularly from the French. The first Egyptian novel *Zainab* was written by Mohamed Husain Haikal while he was studying in France (1909-1912) and was published in 1914. Nostalgia, idealization of the Egyptian peasant farmers, and the romanticism of the Egyptian countryside mark the novel. But the novel embodied many themes that were later to benefit many Egyptian writers. Themes like women's place in society, the role of the intellectuals in Egypt, and the Egyptian countryside as a backdrop for novel writing were employed again and again in the novels of later writers like al-Mazini, Husain, and al-Hakim himself.

But never before the publication of *The Sacred Bond* did any Egyptian novel treat the issue of women's education and sexual freedom as openly or present a challenge to the established institution of religion. When *The Sacred Bond*, a novel in which the heroine seeks sexual fulfillment outside of marriage, was published, al-Hakim was vindicated by



some and attacked by others. Feminist activists hailed the book as a document of repentance drafted by a man who rarely had anything good to say about women. Muslim conservatives, on the other hand, expressed their outrage at the book for its daring challenge to the institution of marriage as regulated by Islam. In an interview with Ghali Shukri many years after the publication of the book, al-Hakim reaffirmed his position by asserting that mutual sexual fulfillment is the basis for the sacred bond. Sexual pleasure “must not be one-sided,” al-Hakim declared, and the days of the “selfish husband” are over.<sup>33</sup>

In light of the above, the novel has gained a reputation for advocating sexual freedom for women. It is a grave mistake, however, to limit the novel to such a theme. The conflict between secularism and Islam in the 40's is a dominant feature in the novel. A careful reader ought to discern an attitude of resistance on al-Hakim's part towards the accepted norms put forth by the Islamic Shari'ah (law of Islam) and an attempt to reconcile them with the impulse of secular society. It is not coincidence then that all characters in the novel, including the Monk-Philosopher, the accomplished writer who resembles al-Hakim, calculate their next moves based on society's reaction and not religious values. Stressing society's role in mediating people's lives was quite a shift, however implicit, for al-Hakim. It was also a risky move on his part, given the intolerance of the Muslim Brothers at the time (1944-45) as exemplified by their assassination of the Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmed Mahir.<sup>34</sup> Most probably, al-Hakim escaped the revenge of the conservatives because of traditional characters like the husband and his cousin who play to the tone of Muslim conservatives to some extent. In addition, the secular tone of the novel was far from attempting to “harness human reason

to the deconstruction of established [religious] institutions,” as Abu-Rabi’ seems to understand secularism.<sup>35</sup>

In the novel, al-Hakim foregrounds the secular norms of society to counteract religious domination and eventually seeks to reconcile the two oppositions. After reading the erotic pages of the Red Notebook which contain the details of his wife’s sexual adventure with a famous actor, the husband gives his wife two options. Either she gives him custody of their only child and in return gets a “quiet divorce” or ventures having her reputation stained by his disclosure of her secret affair to her relatives. The Monk-Philosopher, who mediates the dispute between the two, reveals to the wife how the norms of the modern secular society have a new say in modern Egyptian life:

I don’t see any reason for me to discuss this from a moral point of view, for I don’t like to lecture in morality at all. Lessons in morality have become boring to the majority of people—including yourself, undoubtedly. Words like virtue, vice, chastity, and shame have lost their meaning and become commonplace in slighting and joking. But I can tell you this: a woman is free to do whatever she wants . . . But she must pay attention to this simple intuition: whoever breaks society’s norms will be broken by them. . . . A woman or a girl may either find, in spite of her wild flirtation and unruly liberty, that society still looks at her with respect and nominates her for marriage, or she may find herself dropped from the list of the virtuous, abandoned by men, and chased away. . . . Walls of society alone are capable of limiting her unruliness and determining her proper place within them. Society has become her guardian. It rewards or punishes her, admonishes or forgives her, labels her chaste or writes on her forehead, with her

own red lipstick: 'This is a misfit.' (196)

Most certainly, al-Hakim was aware of the Arabic proverb: "Whoever learns his enemy's tongue defeats him," for he used religious vocabulary (virtue, vice, and chastity) to counteract religious domination. This linguistic incorporation implies that society as a judge of the woman's behavior carries the same weight as religion. In short, al-Hakim imagines a modern society in which both social norms and religious morals rule, not one of them to the exclusion of the other.

Feminism in Egypt experienced a setback during the 40's and early 50's, and newspaper articles about its death could be found. Issues important to women, like the entrance of women into the first ranks of professions and the need for legislation to increase the resources and opportunities for them, proved to be out of reach. The self-educated Egyptian writer al-Aqqad ignited the anti-feminist debate when he insisted that women's emancipation was endangering the traditions of the Egyptian society and that the natural place for women was at home because whatever they did outside of it could easily be outperformed by men. Al-Aqqad's insistence that the function of women was to preserve the species and take care of their husbands was a continuation of the fundamental view long running in Egyptian society that "women lack intelligence and religion." Accordingly, husbands took upon themselves the task of political, economic, and intellectual developments of Egypt without the need for women to lend them a hand. This would explain why women's emancipation has never been viewed as a metaphor for Egypt's nationalism, for, with the exception of the 1919 revolution in which women took part, feminism as a movement has never followed nationalist movements because the two types of movement have often lacked coordination and unity of direction.

During the 40's, a new type of feminism emerged in Egypt with new characteristics. The conscious-raising forum characteristic of the earlier feminist movement in Egypt was abandoned and dissatisfaction with what women had relative to what men had was played down. Most of the members of the new group were already recipients of Western culture with its emphasis on sexual freedom. Thus the new feminists understood feminism as a movement designed to rid them from the shackles of marriage, get them to wear the latest of fashion, and allow them to pursue their sexual dreams. This is exactly the type of feminism al-Hakim ridicules in *The Sacred Bond*. In this sense, women, like Muslim fundamentalists, should have had a lot to worry about when the novel came out.

Unlike al-Aqqad, al-Hakim is able to reconcile traditionalism and women's enlightenment in *The Sacred Bond*. The two traditional male characters in the novel, the husband and the Monk-Philosopher, agree that hooking the wife on reading literature is a lofty mission and criticize her superficial education. Implicit in the dialogue of these two traditional but well-educated men is an attitude on their part that unless women's intellectualism is comparable to men's, whatever women write is unworthy of men's attention and, consequently, of publishing. On their first meeting, the husband defines for the Monk-Philosopher the type of enlightened wife he wishes to live with:

I have always told my wife that she could win my affection but never the respect she is entitled to, unless her mind knew how to communicate with mine. She will not get to that stage until she reads what I read, tastes what I taste of intellect, and engages in a pleasant and fulfilling conversation as a means of filling the void in our long life." (73)

Al-Hakim has maintained that an intellectually informed feminist can write great fiction. In *That al-Misbah al-Akhdar (By the Green Lamp, 1942)* he declares that women are, by nature, more able creatures when it comes to penetrating the self and that they are therefore more fit for novel writing than men (66). But the kind of intellectual woman writer al-Hakim has in mind is not to be found in *The Sacred Bond*. Instead, the heroine in the novel pays more attention to her appearance than to her mind and writes the kind of cheap romance describing details of her sexual adventure. All male characters in the novel are disgusted by what she wrote in the Red Notebook that the husband declares to the Monk-Philosopher: "I'm discouraged, Sir, by our women today" (73). In addition, the novel implies that this type of fiction can do more harm than good, for this woman's cheap romance caused the destruction of two families, the husband's and his cousin's.

In attacking the Red Notebook, al-Hakim makes his character, the husband, mimic the work and show its weaknesses by continually citing absurd passages from it to the Monk-Philosopher almost every time the two meet. There is also a kind of self-parody by the author of the Red Notebook herself as when she claimed that her erotic writing, although great, was a modest attempt on her part: "Perhaps I'd be conceited, or maybe too conceited, to compare myself to you or my work to yours, or to claim that I've written something worthy of your attention. What you have read was no more than my first attempt at writing fiction" (179).

The novel argues by implication for the unworthiness of a feminist movement whose intellectual output is the sort of romance the woman wrote. Both the husband and the Monk-Philosopher are so embarrassed by what they read that neither of them thought the Notebook worthy of being returned to its original author. Even after the divorce was

final, there is no mention in the novel of having this intellectual property returned to its owner. Maybe al-Hakim does not believe that the Red Notebook rises to the level of intellectual property which can be protected by copyright because, unlike *The Sacred Bond*, it failed to balance the sexual and the intellectual.

The conflict between body and intellect nearly dominates the novel. Throughout, al-Hakim contrasts the Monk-Philosopher's preoccupation with matters of intellect to the wife's preoccupation with her body, as clearly as the maturity of the former is contrasted to the youthfulness of the latter. Moreover, we are told early on that even the Monk-Philosopher, disinterested as he is, is body-conscious sometimes. He, like ancient Egyptians priests, who "were careful to keep active and light bodies so that their spirituality wouldn't become suffocated under the heavy weight of mortal flesh" (41), "was like a person on a diet, never deviating except when tempted by fine food or drink." His conservatism "had shielded him from flabbiness and early aging" (40). On her numerous visits to him, we are reminded of the contrast between the smell of her perfume and that of his old books, between her organic nature and his inorganic one, and between the sexual and the intellectual.

The Monk-Philosopher, who used to interpret the sexual from an intellectual point of view, finally realizes that people "must not entrust any of the opposites to dominate and interpret the other" (212). Thanks to the woman's articulation of the sexual: "Trust me, friend, that the whole world with its ideas, virtues, vices, faiths, high ideals, and vanity can easily melt in the heat of a real kiss" (212). Acknowledging her insight, though too conceited to admit it, he begins to resist being swallowed up by the intellect alone: "He realized that she was right and that he had overstated the role of intellect. It was as if he

was looking at the truth with one eye—the intellect” (212). Although there was still “an area of resistance somewhere inside him, working to postpone the moment at which his arms would embrace that woman . . . his hand was, in spite of himself, already searching for her thigh and his lips were searching for hers” (217-18). Thus the Monk-Philosopher’s “subdued senses rose in rebellion” (225) after being suppressed for too long, and al-Hakim makes obvious the possibility of integration of one’s conflicting parts.

Both the quality and quantity of al-Hakim’s literary production proclaim him as an Egyptian and Arabic cultural treasure. His experiments in drama have laid the foundation of modern Egyptian theatre, and his exposure to both the classical and modern writings of European novelists has greatly enhanced his novelistic artistry, which, in turn, has had a profound impact on the younger generation.<sup>36</sup>

There is a bit for everyone in al-Hakim’s novels. Issues of nationalism, internationalism, social protest, the conflict between secularism and religion, and between the intellectual and the sexual, which I have examined, are only examples of a wide range of propositions that can be extracted from his novels. On the technical level, al-Hakim was not as sophisticated as his European counterparts during the time of writing his four novels (1933-1944). That was not the case at all for him as a playwright, for he excelled in writing drama right from the outset and was easily comparable to many Western playwrights of the time. It may be because he paid more attention to the study of dramatic art while in Europe than he did to that of the novel, and, therefore, lacked familiarity with the latter genre and the rapid change it went through during the first half of the twentieth century. Whatever the reason, it is clear that al-Hakim was lacking some

of the narrative strategies and techniques in his early career. Strategic and technical defects include lack of characterization depth, weak endings and poor justification of them, and the overuse of subjective commentary and quotations (as in *Bird of the East* and *The Sacred Bond*).

This must not degrade al-Hakim's greatness, however, for no flawless writer ever existed. Al-Hakim will be remembered as the writer with the incomparable breadth of knowledge who returned from Europe in 1928 to a literary wasteland called Egypt and who left it blooming with modern theater and prospective winners of the Nobel Prize in literature.<sup>37</sup> His impact has not only been felt by men and women of letters but by anyone who was lucky enough to pick up one of his books. In *The Sacred Bond*, the narrator introduces the Monk-Philosopher, a renowned writer, as the man who "offered the hungry food for thought, like a person sitting on a riverbank and throwing crumbs to the fish and watching them snatch the pieces and go" (38). Thus was al-Hakim, an artist with a sense of duty to offer "balanced" responses to the problems facing his people.



## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the influence of al-Hakim, see Denys Johnson-Davies, introduction, *Fate of a Cockroach*, by Tawfiq al-Hakim (Boulder, CO: Three Continents Press, 1980) viii; Richard Long, *Tawfiq al-Hakim Playwright of Egypt* (London: Ithaca Press, 1979) 197; Youssef el-Sharouny, *Udab 'a wa Mufakiron* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misria al-'Amma lil Kitab, 1994) 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> See Alfrid Farag, afterword, *Ragul bila Ruh*, by Tawfiq al-Hakim (Cairo: Dar al-Hilal, 1998) 191-290. Farag blames traditional “men of theater” in Egypt for “failing to understand al-Hakim’s new vision” in drama and, consequently, for causing a good number of his plays not to be staged (199). In the preface to his play, *Pygmalion* (1942), al-Hakim explains why his plays were more read than staged: “The reason is simple: I write my plays to be staged inside the mind, and I transform the characters into ideas that move in the abstract of meaning, wearing symbolic attire. . . . This is why the gulf between me and the stage has been widening that I cannot find a bridge through which I transport my work to people except the press” (12). Many of al-Hakim’s plays, however, have been performed both in Egypt and abroad, particularly in France.

<sup>3</sup> See Long, *Tawfiq al-Hakim Playwright of Egypt* 187-88.

<sup>4</sup> Mahfouz, the 1988 Nobel Prize winner in literature, has always acknowledged al-

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Hakim's influence on him and on the development of modern Arabic novel in general.

For more on the influence of al-Hakim on Mahfouz, see William Hutchins, introduction, *Return of the Spirit*, by Tawfiq al-Hakim, trans. William Hutchins (Washington D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1990) 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Hakim, *The Prison of Life* 9.

<sup>6</sup> See Ismail Adham and Ibrahim Nagi, *Tawfiq Al-Hakim* (Tunisia: al- Maktaba al-Arabia, n.d.) 52.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Hakim finished elementary education in Damanhur, a city some ninety miles north of Cairo, then was sent in 1916 to Cairo, where he lived with his paternal uncles and attended secondary school because Damanhur did not yet have secondary schools.

<sup>8</sup> 10. Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Return of the Spirit*, trans. William Hutchins (Washington, D. C.: Three Continents Press, 1990) 81.

<sup>9</sup> Adham and Nagi, *Tawfiq al-Hakim* 56-57.

<sup>10</sup> Gamal Abdel Nasser, the charismatic president of Egypt from 1954 to 1970, was a member of the Free Officers, a group of military officers who led the Revolution of 1952 against the British and their ally, King Farouk. Being Nasser's favorite writer, al-Hakim held high posts in the government and enjoyed Nasser's blessings, but attacked him and his regime in *'Awdat al-Wa'y (Return of Consciousness)* after his death for depriving the Egyptians, particularly the intellectuals, of their consciousness during his reign.

<sup>11</sup> Qasim Amin (1863-1908) was an advocate of woman's liberation and education.

<sup>12</sup> See Ghali Shukri, *Thorat al-Mutazil* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misria al-'Amma lil Kitab, 1995) 396-97.

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<sup>13</sup> Mohamed Shusha, *Nis'a fi Hayat Adu al-Mar'a* (Cairo: Akhbar al-Yum, 1987) 125.

<sup>14</sup> See Salah Tahir, ed., *Ahadith Ma'a Tawfiq al-Hakim min sanat 1951-1971* (Cairo: al-Ahram, 1971) 127-154.

<sup>15</sup> For a thorough discussion of the history of the period, see John Marlowe, *A History of Modern Egypt and Anglo-Egyptian Relations 1800-1953* (New York: Praeger, 1954); P. Vatikiotis, *The History of Egypt from Muhammad Ali to Sadat* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>16</sup> Unlike the 1952 Revolution, which was in reality a military coup, the 1919 Revolution was a spontaneous uprising by people from all walks of life, including women for the first time in Egyptian history. In *'Awdat al-Wa'y*, al-Hakim compares the 1952 Revolution with that of 1919 and concludes that the latter was the real Revolution because it was led by the people, not by a political party or figure.

<sup>17</sup> Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayid (1873-1963) was the founder of *Al-Jarida*, a political newspaper, and a moderate politician, translator, and influential literary figure.

<sup>18</sup> For a full account of the literary schools in Egypt and the Arab world before and after WWI, see Adham and Nagi, *Tawfiq al-Hakim* 17-48; I. I. Ibrahim, "The Egyptian Intellectuals between Tradition and Modernity: A Study of Some Important Trends in Egyptian Thought 1922-1952," diss., Oxford University, 1967, 23-27.

<sup>19</sup> Mohamed Abdu (1849-1905) is a late 19<sup>th</sup> century moderate Muslim thinker and reformer who graduated from al-Azhar and studied in France.

<sup>20</sup> Established in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, al Azhar is a prestigious university in Cairo teaching principles of Islam and devoted to preserving its conventional values. It is the oldest continually active university in the Muslim world.

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<sup>21</sup> For an excellent discussion of the revival of Islam in the 1930's, see M. E. Yapp, *The Near East Since the First World War: A History to 1995* (London and New York: Longman, 1996) 63-68.

<sup>22</sup> See Hilary Kilpatrick, *The Modern Egyptian Novel: A Study in Social Criticism* (London: Ithaca Press, 1974) 1-17.

<sup>23</sup> For a thorough discussion of the developments of women's education in Egypt, see Nagat al-Sanabary, "Continuity and Change in Women's Education in the Arab States," *Women and the Family in the Middle East: New Voices of Change*, ed. Elizabeth Fernea (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985) 93-110.

<sup>24</sup> Pasha is a title given by the Ottomans who ruled Egypt to the highest government officials in that country. It is not uncommon for some Egyptians to use this title today to glorify one another.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Hakim, *Prison of Life* 156-67, 173.

<sup>26</sup> Gilbert Victor Tutungi, "Tawfiq Al-Hakim and the West," diss., Indiana University, 1966, 19-20.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the letter, see Mohamed Shusha, *Khamsa wa Thamanoon Shama 'h fi Hyat al-Hakim* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1984) 84-85.

<sup>28</sup> Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Zahrat al-Umr* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Usrah, 1998) 77. A collection of letters sent by al-Hakim to his French friend, André, during the former's stay in France and after returning to Egypt.

<sup>29</sup> In his introduction to the second edition of *Rihlat al-Rabi' wa al-Kharif* (*Journey of the Spring and Autumn*), al-Hakim acknowledges having been greatly influenced by the symbolism of Maeterlink (11).

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<sup>30</sup> See Al-Hakim, *Sultan al-Zalam* 21.

<sup>31</sup> See Hutchins, introduction 15. Isis is the Goddess of fertility and the wife of Osiris, the first king of pharaonic Egypt and god of death.

<sup>32</sup> P.H. Newby, foreword, *Maze of Justice: Diary of a Country Prosecutor*, by Tawfiq al-Hakim, trans. Abba Eban (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989) 9.

<sup>33</sup> See Ghali Shukri, *Thawrat al-Mutazil* (Cairo: al-Hay'a al-Misria al-'Amma lil Kitab, 1995) 369-80.

<sup>34</sup> The Muslim Brothers is a group of Muslims founded by Hasan al-Bana in 1927. The goal was to regulate society according to the moral principles of Islam. Members of the group often clashed with secular ruling parties.

<sup>35</sup> Ibrahim Abu-Rabi, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany, NY: Suny Press, 1996) 249. Abu-Rabi defines secularism as the devaluation of God and the erasure of all religious aspects in society. Al-Hakim, on the other hand, seeks to establish a middle ground between secularism and religion.

<sup>36</sup> For more on how al-Hakim's writing has shaped the Egyptian novel, see Ghali Shukri, *Thawrat al-Mutazil* 115-52.

<sup>37</sup> Naguib Mahfouz won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1988, only a year after al-Hakim had died.

**ENGLISH TRANSLATION**

*AL-RIBAT AL-MUQADDAS*

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## **The Monk-Philosopher**

In his everyday clothes, a housecoat and beret, he quite resembled a monk. Perhaps his appearance was in harmony with his lifestyle. His was a quiet life, spent mainly among books and papers. It was as motionless as ink in an inkwell. Nothing in his life ever moved ahead. Each day was like all the others, as if the days refused to advance, or came together, merging into a single, eternal day.

Nonetheless, there was an incessant and uninterrupted flow of thought reaching the masses through his books and affecting them to their core. He offered the hungry food for thought, like a person sitting on a riverbank and throwing crumbs to the fish and watching them snatch the pieces and go. Such was the impact of his writings and opinions on people.

Conscious of his impact on people, he took his work seriously. He never misled people by preaching what he didn't practice. The duty of a thinker and a man of letters, he believed, is to show people ways by which they can rise above themselves. Fidelity to his duty, therefore, required of him to lead a lofty, dignified, and irreproachable life.

He always despised writers who offered the public a refined and uniquely beautiful product while leading a life full of lowliness, meanness, and ugliness. The true writer, he thought, must be exemplary in both his private and public lives. If he isn't, then he is like a clown who puts on royal clothes in people's presence but takes them off when alone



and becomes as insignificant as a beggar. This was the reason the Monk-Philosopher resorted to such a strict code of conduct in life.

No one lived with him in his flat except an experienced servant who managed his affairs and saw to his needs. He didn't need much, however. After reading and reflection, he would sit by his bookcase and be content with organizing its rows and sections in such a manner that his hand would not mistake a book even in complete darkness.

He always read in bed before sleep. Sometimes he would pull out a book in one of the sciences or arts simply by stretching his hand in the direction of the bookcase, without turning the light, as if his fingers knew how to distinguish titles of books only by touch. Whenever he contemplated something, he would go in circles and would never sit down before arriving at a decision. His eyes and ears were necessarily his primary senses, but he called up on his other senses to serve his intellectual endeavor as well.

He took pleasure in spending his spare moments looking at book spines, lined up on the shelves, and reading the names of their immortal authors, one by one, as though they were war heroes paraded after a battle. Then, unable to restrain himself, he would yell out in the quiet room: "These are the heroes who moved the world and led mankind . . . though my life is one of isolation and stagnation, I feel among them as if everything around me is in a perpetual motion. Everything is motionless except intellect. Intellect is the greatest movement!"

That man reminded everyone with the image of the “man of letters” as described by Carlyle: “the light of the world; the world’s priest: guiding it, like a sacred pillar of fire, in its dark pilgrimage through the waste of time.”<sup>1</sup>

Thus was the man and his way of life: simple and disinterested. He never viewed the good things life has to offer as his daily diet or regular drink. To him they were only occasional doses designed to quench his thirst and energize his body. Sometimes he would treat himself to a good meal, but he generally ate for sustenance. He was like a person on a diet, never deviating except when tempted by fine food or drink. He would then eat the delicacy with relish. But come the next day, he would go back to his regular and strict regime of simple food and clear water.

As for staying out late at night and the pleasure that often comes with it, he retired to his room and went to bed at a regular hour. But that didn’t prevent him from breaking the rules once in a while. He stayed out late on occasions and did what others did when having fun. But unlike the others, who didn’t know when to stop when they needed to, he woke up the next morning forgetting about all that had happened the night before, except that it was a necessary push for him to continue his work and obligatory duty.

Perhaps the greatest power this man had was his ability to fight temptation. He knew exactly when to stop drinking from the glass of life and could say “enough” with determination. He wasn’t, therefore, known as one who plunged himself into any sort of amusement in life. No one heard about his connection with a particular woman. He was careful to keep people ignorant about such matters, wanting them to know that he abstained.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The Best Known Works of Thomas Carlyle* (New York: The Book League of America, 1942) 255.

There was another great advantage to be gained by virtue of his ability to fight temptation. His simple lifestyle shielded him from flabbiness and early aging. All who saw him thought him much younger than he actually was. The freshness of his face was that of a man in his thirties. Had it not been for a few gray hairs, he would've won the battle against time and remained forever young. He modeled his life on the lives of ancient Egyptian priests as recorded by Plutarch, the Greek biographer: "They followed a strict system of diet because they viewed priesthood and health as two sides of a single coin. They never went too far in eating meat or vegetables or even drinking from the Nile, believing that too much of its water would fatten their bodies as it would enrich the soil. They believed obesity weakened the priesthood and were careful to keep active and light bodies, so that their spirituality wouldn't become suffocated under the heavy weight of mortal flesh."

No Egyptian priest was fat or showed his real age. They were all slim and forever young, as if the gods had granted them the power to resist time. The truth is that they weren't given the power to resist time but to overcome themselves, and whoever triumphs over the latter also defeats the former. This was what the Monk-Philosopher understood and practiced.

He thought his life was bright and colorful. But its light didn't emanate from nightclubs, cabarets, or taverns. To him nightlife was the life of the self in its noble attachment to what he read in the quiet hours and in its focused attention to the ideas and thoughts which filled his silent world.

As for his daily routine, he starts off by reading the papers and checking the

incoming mail from Egypt and abroad. Then he goes out for a walk for about an hour, checking the fronts of the bookstores. He returns home and gets down to work, after ordering his servant to shut the windows so that the twittering of his neighbor's caged canary wouldn't disturb him. He sits and writes for many hours until called—more than once—by his servant for dinner, but to no avail, for he is absorbed in his work and unaware of anything else. But he eventually gives in to his servant's entreaty, throwing aside his pen and rising in complaint, as if driven to be flogged not to be fed.

On the day this story began, the Monk-Philosopher sat down to open the incoming mail from his readers, as was his morning habit. Those moments gave him the most pleasure, for he delighted in keeping this sort of intellectual touch with those for whom he wrote and worked hard but whom he never saw. But he rarely cared to answer any of these letters, not out of snobbery or affectation but of a belief that he had already said everything to his readers in his books. Letters from his readers, then, were no more than their answers to his already published books, in which he offered them the most precious extract of his intellect.

On that morning a particular letter caught his eye and drew his attention. It was from a twenty-two years old young woman who wished to be a writer and who insisted on meeting with him to put her case before him and ask his opinion. She didn't leave her name or address but said she would call to set up an appointment.

He wondered about the letter. Unlike other letters he was accustomed to receiving from women, that one was serious and to the point—lacking that chattiness characteristic of women, who often flirted with him, wrote to him, and called regularly. But he avoided

talking to them on the phone, asking his servant instead to answer and to put an end to all pointless calls.

This young woman's serious letter was something else. She knew what she was after and expressed her noble goal to him in two lines. How could he with a clear conscience discourage her from following through with her dreams? As a matter of duty he decided to meet with her.

He sunk in his chair and began to draw pictures of the young woman in his mind. He wondered what she looked like and what kind of a person she was. He understood that a woman who devotes her life to intellect is undoubtedly one who hasn't found a man to devote it to. But then she said she was in the prime of her life—only twenty-two. Maybe she feels then that nature has stripped her of the charm needed to conquer a man's heart, he thought. And when a woman is stripped of that charm she may as well put on the nuns' habit, the hidden power and unique glamour of which she might use to knock at the door of hope once again. At any rate, it was all right with him to meet with her. But it wasn't until the afternoon that the phone rang and the servant informed his master about her asking to see him. He told the servant to give her an appointment for the next morning.

On the following day, the Monk-Philosopher sat down to work. There was a knock at the door, and the servant appeared to inform his master that the girl had arrived. Without moving or showing interest, he asked his servant to usher her in and continued to be absorbed in his work until he heard the rustling of her dress near him. Then he raised his head and looked at her. He was speechless. No sooner had he seen the young woman than everything in his head was turned upside down. The imaginary picture he had of her

became void in the speed of light. That young woman was beautiful, elegant, and stylish. She resembled those women who strut in the stands of racetracks wearing the latest fashions and perfume and leaving behind them, with each step, thousands of lusty looks, heartbreaks, and sighs. She was the type of woman people see in the theater's front boxes on opening night, whose presence draws whispers and bewitches the crowd.

The Monk-Philosopher was confused. He thought to himself, "This isn't the right place for this young woman." Noticing his confusion, she took the initiative of greeting him.

"I want you, Sir, to be totally frank with me," she said, smiling and taking a seat where he signaled her.

"It is I who wish you to be frank with me," he said as though speaking to himself while his eyes inspected her.

She fell silent for a moment and lowered her eyelashes, casting a shadow on her face.

"Sir, I love literature."

"Literature, Madame, is honored by your love," he said sarcastically but quickly, to avoid giving her the impression that he was ridiculing her.

His face showed signs of doubt. He nonetheless continued, "But, what exactly do you mean exactly, Miss? Can you clarify a bit for me?"

She was silent again, as though she didn't know how to begin. She took to inspecting the place in which this man of letters lived. She found nothing cheerful at all: no flowers in full bloom, elegant furniture, colorful wallpaper or enough light.

He felt her discomfort with the place, sensed her desire to breathe, and saw her crimson lips tremble, as if she wanted to scream, in spite of herself: “Is this the air of literature?”

He caught her looking at the bare, curtainless window and the tall building which blocked the sun in front of it. He imagined her asking: “Is this enough light for you?”

He answered calmly, “Our inner light is always enough.”

She didn’t seem to catch his drift. Her face showed signs of disappointment.

What surprised him was that she didn’t leave the place after all. He wondered why she had come and why she was still tied to her seat. He looked at her thoroughly and said, “If I’m not mistaken, Miss, you were not born to be a woman of letters.”

“Why not?” she said unenthusiastically while looking uselessly for a mirror in the room to check herself and refute his words.

He didn’t bother to comment. Of course, he couldn’t tell her that it was difficult for him to visualize a beautiful woman of letters. A woman, he thought, can give her life to literature but not her beauty.

He wanted to pull her secret out of her: “What genre do you prefer?”

She hurried to conceal her confusion by pulling a mirror and a lipstick out of her purse.

“I don’t prefer one genre over the others,” she answered while touching up her lipstick.

He fixed his eyes on her.

“Why have you honored me with your visit?” he asked suddenly.

She looked in her small mirror and said, “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Have you read any of my books?”

“Of course!”

“What have you read?”

“Umm . . .”

She pretended to forget, but he didn't want to embarrass her any further. He fell silent. His fingers took to fumbling with her letter for a moment. He came to realize that she was there to mock him and thought of the many conceited young women who find pleasure in flirting with lonely men and in poking fun at recluse-monks.

He said, somewhat harshly, “Listen, Miss, why did you write me asking to be a writer?”

“Because I want to. Is it difficult to be a writer?” she answered while returning the mirror and lipstick to her purse.

He didn't know what to say. He felt like a preacher whose pulpit was hit by a stone. She sensed what he was going through, for she was somewhat intelligent, as the shine in her beautiful eyes indicated. She hurried to ask.

“Do you want to know the truth?”

He was silent for a while, thinking about his posture and the housecoat and beret he had on. Then he reflected on her last question and compared his encounter with her to that of the monk with Thaïs in Anatole France's *Thaïs*.

She raised her head and drew near him saying, “The truth is I don't like literature and haven't read a single book since I left school. Nothing irritates me like reading and writing. When I write a letter to one of my girlfriends, I must take aspirin afterwards. What I do like are movies, horse races, dancing, and music.”



“Jazz, of course,” he interrupted her.

“Of course,” she replied matter-of-factly.

He sighed then said, as if speaking to himself, “I was correct then.”

The young woman didn’t allow him time to proceed.

“Yes, but I still want . . .” she said hurriedly.

“Want what?”

“Yes, I want . . . I want to fall in love with literature,” she said with determination.

His mouth fell open in wonder. He didn’t know what to say to the presumptuous young woman.

“Miss, do you regard literature as a graceful male dancer or a slender race horse?”

She frowned and lowered her long eyelashes. He detected a violent struggle shaking her from within. She finally trembled and begged him: “Please . . . please, don’t send me back disappointed and desperate.”

He fell silent for a moment then said, gently, “I’m at your service, Madame, but we must limit our discussion only to the reasonable.”

“Yes, make me fall in love with literature at any price, at whatever cost.”

“This is unreasonable, Madame. How can I make you?”

“Why can’t you?”

“Because love cannot be solicited or bought. You know that better than I.”

“Yes, that’s true,” she whispered in pain.

Her desperation somewhat affected him. He remembered that, up to that moment, he never asked about the motivations behind her strange endeavor. He turned to ask her, but she said quickly, “Don’t ask me! What is the use since you cannot help me anyway?”

She got up to leave; he got up, too, preoccupied with her matter. She offered him her hand saying, "I'm sorry I bothered you, I must be silly because I thought everything was possible."

"Yes, everything is possible, provided that a person has enough will power and that the motive is pure," he said, still holding her hand.

She released her hand gently and hastened to say, "If I guarantee you my will power and a pure motive, will you promise to help me?"

Her eyes shined with renewed hope, making it difficult for him to say no. But he feared promising her something he could not deliver, ignorant as he was of her situation. He was in the dark about many issues having to do with her. When conversing, the meaning of words differed depending upon who uttered them. His interpretation of the word "literature" was different from hers. He was yet to figure out what drove her desperation or hope.

"Listen, Miss . . . I won't promise you anything until you explain why you came to see me."

She reflected for a moment then turned to him and said, "I hope you don't ask me about names, for I won't give you my first or family name. All I can reveal to you is that I have a fiancé who is in love with me as I am with him. He is the man I've always dreamed of. Nothing wrong with him except that he likes to read literature. He takes me to the cinema and horse races. He converses with me about all that interest me, but I cannot do the same with him. He calls me a 'fickle girl' and forgives me everything except the long silences between us. Our conversations break down because of my

‘triviality and foolishness,’ as he puts it. He always reminds me of the deep abyss in our marriage: my inability to discuss matters of intellect with him.

“I will never forget his statement to me one day, ‘The perfect connection I had hoped to have with my wife will never be realized in our marriage because half of life—the life of intellect—will always be outside of it. So, you will only have half of me.’

“The poor creature made books available to me, but I flung them away in boredom. I hate books, but I want to have possession of the other half of my husband. I want him all, body and mind.

“He liked to play tennis; I wasn’t crazy about the game. But out of sheer will power I learned to play and developed a taste for it, in a matter of a few months. Because of my tenacity I have succeeded in everything except reading books. This is why I came asking for your help.

“My fiancé likes your books. He said your straightforward style makes them suitable for me. But alas! I confess to you that they are as unbearable as other books. Yet I still have no doubt that you have the medicine to cure me. I believe there is cure for every disease. My marital happiness is now in your hands. Tell me, how can a ‘fickle girl’ like me reform herself and look more significant in her husband’s eyes? Is there any hope that I can become his intellectual equal? Speak to me! Is there any hope for the likes of me to cross the threshold of the sublime and sacred area you call ‘intellect’ or am I to continue gazing at it from outside forever?”

The young woman fell silent, and the Monk-Philosopher stood almost awe-struck. Her final sad words echoed in his ears. He realized for the first time that a man of letters has a duty similar to that of a man of religion. Many a time he had written describing that

similarity, but never before was he convinced of its striking reality. The image of the monk in *Thaïs* surfaced in his head once again.

Thaïs, that playful beauty, betook herself to see the monk. She dragged along her endless past of aberration and error. She knocked at the door of his monastic cell asking to see the light of truth. Do you suppose the monk turned her down or sent her back desperate? No, a monk has no right to turn a person away from seeing the light of God, he thought. Like the monk in *Thaïs*, the Monk-Philosopher is a servant, not of God but of intellect. He, too, has a duty to perform: to spread the light of intellect. What right has he, then, to implant despair in the hearts of those who come to seek his aid?

The Monk-Philosopher realized that he had another duty besides creating and composing. He ought to do his best to lend a hand to those poor and blind souls and to open their eyes gradually to the flowing light of intellect.

He raised his head and turned to the young woman saying, "You can depend on me."

### Thaïs at Tennis

Seven nights passed by and the Monk-Philosopher was still thinking about the young woman. He had promised to help her and she became dependent on him. They'd agreed to meet once a week, but he still didn't know what to do to guide her to the life of intellect. He began to doubt the success of his mission and thought that a religious monk had it easier, for a straying woman can be guided to heaven without much effort because the beauty of virtue is self-evident and the essence of good and evil does not require proof. Besides, the principles of divine beliefs can penetrate the heart quickly without long preparation or explanation.

The case is different in matters of intellect and letters, however. Inclination to read and think cannot be implanted; it is an inborn quality. And seeds of intellect cannot be sown in a soil God has not prepared for germination. He believed, however, that God has prepared every human being to receive the best seeds and light of beauty, but it all depends on the ability of the seeder and discoverer to find the secret of sublime beauty.

He no longer doubted the success of his mission and planned to quit wasting time thinking about it and to concentrate instead on finding a way to help the young woman.

His fruitless search for answers over the course of the previous nights vexed him. Then it dawned on him to find guidance in the action taken by the monk in *Thaïs*. He reached for the book, which he hadn't opened in twenty years and had nearly forgotten.

He plunged into it for two nights, as though reading it for the first time. Half-way through, he began to discern things. He cried, "How miserable can humans be! They are destined to blindness, yet they think they see. We see the truth of things only with our inner eyes and recognize reality through its relation to and collision with the essence of our feelings. No matter my sublimity of mind and peak of intellect, I could not have penetrated into the depths of monk Paphnutius before today, because only now do I feel the things he felt because of the similarity between our situations.

"There is a difference between us, however. Paphnutius left his cell in the bowels of the desert and walked the long nights barefoot, stepping on insects and eating grass, to see beautiful Thaïs in Alexandria and to guide her to the light of heaven. He sustained danger and terror because of her. But what made him do that? The idea came to bear suddenly one evening when a beautiful vision of her crossed his mind. It was then that he remembered seeing her for the first time in the sea-side city before he devoted his life to God. Like people who were fond of her, he recalled his burning desire for her. But his love of God had overcome his love of woman. Consequently, he lived in seclusion in the heart of the desert until something strange crossed his mind: to perform a miracle and win that beauty over to religion."

He continued to read vigorously, yearning to get to that part of the book where Paphnutius encountered Thaïs. He wanted to know the means by which Paphnutius was able to shake that perverted girl, to dazzle her sleepy eyes, and to open her immoral and frivolous heart to the kind of noble beauty to which she was unaccustomed.

These were Paphnutius's words to beautiful Thaïs when the two met, "I love thee, O Thaïs! I love thee more than myself. For thee I have quitted the desert; for thee my

lips—vowed to silence—have pronounced profane words; for thee I have seen what I ought not to have seen, and heard what it was forbidden for me to hear; for thee my soul is troubled, my heart is open, and the thoughts gush out like the running springs at which the pigeons drink; for thee I have walked day and nights across sandy desert teeming with reptiles and vampires; for thee I have placed my bare foot on vipers and scorpions! Yes, I love thee! I love thee, but not like those men who, burning with the lust of flesh, come to thee like devouring wolves or furious bulls. Thou art dear to them as is gazelle to the lion. Their ravaging lust will consume thee to the soul, O woman! I love thee in spirit and truth; I love thee in God, and for ever and ever; that which is in my breast is named true zeal and divine charity. I promise thee better things than drunkenness crowned with flowers of the dreams of a brief night. I promise thee holy feasts and celestial suppers. The happiness that I bring thee will never end; it is unheard-of, it is ineffable, and such that if the happy of this world could only see a shadow of it they would die of wonder. . . . Heaven is my witness . . . that it is my intention not to leave thee until we share the same sentiments. Who will inspire me with burning words that will melt thee in my breath, O woman, that the fingers of my desire may mould thee as they wish . . . [and] imprint on thee a fresh beauty, and that thou mayest cry, weeping for joy, ‘It is only now that I am born.’<sup>2</sup>

The Monk-Philosopher read no more. He anticipated the outcome, for a man who can say such words to a woman is sure to win her heart. Woman, that earthly and heavenly flower, opens up as soon as the dewy word “love” falls on her, regardless of how the word is clothed and regardless of its purpose or end. Love is woman’s faith,

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<sup>2</sup> Anatole France, *Thais*, trans. Robert Douglas (New York: Stratford Press, 1929) 91, 93, 94.

undoubtedly. It is the facile and easy way for her to embrace faith, any faith. He realized that he, unlike Paphnutius, couldn't fall in love with the young woman, not because he was incapable of loving her but because he thought he ought not to. He recalled, however, that love was the driving force behind her coming to his secluded place. Her love of her refined fiancé, that is, made her leave her world and come to that of the Monk-Philosopher. On her way, she, too, crossed his intellectual desert with her tiny feet pressing against high heels, accustomed only to stepping on soft carpets, shiny marble, and flower-strewn garden lawns.

He waited for her to come at her usual time, but she didn't. He heaved a deep sigh and said, "Her bright world has reclaimed her and left me falling in her trap."

He couldn't hide or explain his inner confusion. It was a kind of deep and regretful feeling. About what and why? He couldn't tell, for it was beyond his conscious mind.

There was a sudden knock at the door. A Nubian man in clean clothes appeared and informed him that he was her chauffeur and handed him a note. In the note, she apologized for not keeping to her appointment and said it was inappropriate for her to see him in her tennis suit, adding that she didn't have the courage to give up such a beautiful morning for anything, even if it was literature and intellect. She was filling her lungs with fresh air and exposing her long flowing hair and bare arms to the sun of that gorgeous winter. She was looking at the water in the Nile glittering in its green riverbed, like a sword lying on lawn grass or a silver ribbon wrapped around a green hat. She asked for his forgiveness for bringing in such a simile for she, like other women, was preoccupied with the styles of modern hats. She concluded by asking him once more to forgive her and to erase any doubts he had about her, her word, her determination, or her



eventual success in realizing her goal: the elevation of her soul and thought to the level of her beloved fiancé.

Her note was written quickly and poorly, and not without some misspelled words. She wrote like she spoke. Hers wasn't the style of a seasoned writer. Nevertheless, her words released a certain fragrance, and her rich and lively self nearly jumped out from the lines on the page. If he had it right, the young woman was like a spring, filled with pure water, waiting only for someone to discover it and to let its sweet water quench people's thirst and refresh their minds. She had the essence of the literary spirit but she wasn't aware of it. Indeed, literature is spirit above all. Style can be picked up later with practice and long patience, he thought. If she wants to be stylish she must look at writing not as a process of composition and creation but rather as a spirit lighting her crystal inner self. Only then can she utter lofty words and express sublime ideas.

The picture was becoming clearer and clearer in his mind and his mission was becoming more defined. He wanted to recreate that woman and to transform her into a bride running in joy with her long flowing hair and lighted spirit in the spacious and flowery pastures of intellect. He wanted to turn her into a queen, like those recorded in history who knew how to touch men's souls with the scepter of their spirit as they touched their eyes with the makeup pencil. Men then would see like they've never seen before and their souls would become energized as a result, causing genius to bear fruit, determination to rise, all good things to be plentiful, and things and beings to pulse with life.

This is not strange to a woman. She is the treasure of treasures, buried in earth's seventh layer; no one can bring her out except a magician or a skillful priest. She is the

miracle of miracles, wrapped in heaven's seventh layer; who can bring her down but a  
monk, loyal and strong in faith?

### The Lovely One Reads

Another week passed. The Monk-Philosopher sat down one morning waiting for her. It was the day she was scheduled to come. A particular thought made him look through the window for the sun. It was hidden behind the clouds. The day was cold and overcast. “Nothing should keep her from coming,” he thought. He was not disappointed. No sooner had the time for her appointment come than she knocked at his door. She came into the room wearing an expensive fur coat and greeted him with a joyful smile.

“Here I am, on time!” she said, taking off her gloves.

He looked towards the window and asked her with hidden sarcasm: “No tennis this morning?”

“It is depressing outside without the sunshine,” she said in a serious voice.

“Well, it’s literature’s turn to shine and cheer you up,” he said promptly.

She was pleased with his remark. She sat down in front of him like a rational child anxious for a delicious apple to be given her shortly. He didn’t speak for a moment. He didn’t know what to say or do. His eyes began to examine her furry coat, face, and hair, whose styling suggested the work of a skilled hairdresser. He remembered then—without knowing why—Paphnutius’s fiery words to Thaïs. His heart trembled, but he soon regained control. The idea of the comparison forced a light, artificial laughter out of

him. Ignorant of the reason behind his laughter, she hastened, “Do you think me unworthy?” she asked, like a child afraid of losing a promised present.

“I think you’re worthy enough for me to spare you the bitterness of medicine. You hate books, but I don’t know how I can introduce you to literature without them. It’s difficult for me to force you to do something you hate,” he said while looking down as if speaking to himself.

He was silent for a moment. Then he reflected on what he just said and it dawned on him that he was wrong, for nothing can be accomplished without effort, discipline, and hard work. The more sublime the cause, the greater the effort should be. His role was like that of a father to the girl. Like a father, he would not hesitate to be hard on her when necessary. She ought to value books; nothing else would do, he thought. He was determined to be decisive with her. Either she would learn to like reading, listen to his advice, follow his orders, and cooperate or she would have to leave at once empty handed simply because he couldn’t do miracles.

His face changed and its features became severe. His lips opened, about to announce his decision to her, but something caused them to close again before the words came out. It was that mysterious fear bathing in the depths of his self. Yes, he was afraid of scaring away that beautiful bird and engendering indifference to song-learning at his hand. He was afraid she would become satisfied with her hollow old chirp on tree branches. He looked at her, hesitant and confused.

“Listen, Miss!”

She intuitively understood what was bothering him and took the initiative to speak.

“Don’t worry! I’ll do what you tell me. Didn’t I tell you I have will power?”

Encouraged, he asked: "Will you read?"

"Everything you ask me to," she answered quickly.

"And write?" he asked zealously.

"Everything you order me to," she said promptly.

"The problem is solved then," he screamed in joy.

"Yes, I can always find plenty of time to read and write in bed by my rose-shaded lamp before sleep. But there is one problem ..." she said, as if deliberating.

"What is it?"

"Of course you're going to test me on what I read, and I tell you right from the start: I will fail the test," she said as if speaking to herself.

He laughed, "You seem to doubt your potential."

She smiled, "No. My biggest problem is that I can't stand taking exams. When I do, everything evaporates in my head like smoke. But there will be no other way to prove to you that I've read anything."

He looked suspicious.

"Listen, Miss! Are you playing a wicked game with me and contemplating a way out right from the start?"

She smiled, uncovering perfect teeth.

"Rest assured that the idea of running off is far from my mind. But I thought I'd let you know my weaknesses beforehand, so you would take precaution."

He thought about her words for a moment, then cried out as if the problem was solved, "Listen, Miss, I have found a solution that you may find satisfactory."

"What is it?"

“What do you say to having me stand in front of you and you quizzing me?”

She laughed until her eyes became watery.

“I quiz you?”

“Why not?”

He picked a book near by.

“You will read this book and when you come next week you can ask me anything you wish. I will not ask you a single question.”

She looked at him, as if saying, “How clever of you,” but had no choice except to obey. She took the book from him, weighed it in her hand and asked: “Am I supposed to read all this in a week?”

“Read some of it. Ten pages ... or five. I’m not asking you to read the whole book. I scarcely finish a book myself.”

She looked at him, amazed.

“How strange! How do you know, then, what the book is about?”

“Content is not always my primary concern. I’m like a chef who goes around visiting other chefs’ kitchens. That chef need not consume every dish they have in order to judge the quality of their cooking. He only needs to have a taste of each to know at once how it’s made and with what ingredients,” he said smiling.

“But, I . . .”

He anticipated what she was about to say.

“Yes, you too need only have a taste. The questions you’ll ask me about the pages you have read will show me how far you have immersed yourself in the world of morals. The number of pages you read does not matter; your comprehension does.”

She was silent for a moment. She lowered her eyelashes and began to flip the pages, absorbed in her thought. Glancing at the title of the book, she said, innocently and naïvely: “*Thaïs*! Who is *Thaïs*? Tell me so that I can come here next week with my head held high.”

“You’ll know when you read the book,” he answered with a vague smile.

The book he gave her was Anatole France’s *Thaïs*. Why exactly did he choose it? Was it because the book was handy at the moment, or was his choice intentional? In truth, it was both.

He had reread that book the day before because of her and wished her to read it too: he needed to know the extent to which she understood certain situations in the text. Who knows? Maybe he picked the right book for her. Maybe she would realize intellectually or intuitively the sacredness of that lofty beauty for which *Thaïs* discarded the vanity, wealth, and joys of this world. He wanted her heart to be illuminated by a new light from heaven, not earth. He wanted her to have true faith in moral beauty, the effect and meaning of which she had no knowledge. She could perceive all these things from reading *Thaïs*, he thought.

But he was afraid her intelligence would enable her to unmask the character Paphnutius and let her eyes penetrate to the depth of his emotions and detect what the Monk-Philosopher didn’t want her to know yet. He began to be disturbed by the idea of comparing himself to Paphnutius and thought that the comparison was and ought to be out of place. For if the girl detected any similarity between the two, it would be the end of his relationship with her, and he would not hesitate on his part to ask her not to come any more.

She got up, holding the book and putting her gloves on. She offered her hand to him.

“I hope nothing will take me away from reading this book, so I can come back to see you next week with my head held high,” she said smiling.

But he was still so troubled by his obsessive thought that he extended his hand not to shake hers but to take the book back.

“I’m afraid I gave you the wrong book. Give it to me and take another one.”

His voice clearly reflected his anxiety and confusion. She gazed at his face with her sparkling eyes and said with resolve “No . . . I want to get to know Thaïs.”



### **Did You Read?**

A week later, the girl returned and cast the book in front of the Monk-Philosopher, as if ridding herself of a heavy load. She heaved a sigh of relief.

“Did you read it?” he asked anxiously, looking sharply at her.

She avoided looking straight at him.

“A few pages then I got bored,” she answered.

He, too, breathed a sigh of relief because she had not dug deep into the book. But his feeling of relief didn’t last long. Her answer made him sorry, angry, and disappointed.

He turned to her and said angrily, “The trial has failed then!”

“It’s not my fault,” she fired back while putting on lipstick.

He didn’t like her answer or her behavior much and was about to scold her for making herself up in his presence and for failing to maintain a professional conduct. But he realized that he had no right to do so and that the fault really was his, for he went too far in trusting her intellectual ability to understand a book she could not appreciate.

After finishing with her makeup, she turned to him and began to read in his face all that he was going through.

“Are you angry? Haven’t you said it was enough for me to read a few pages? So this is what I’ve done,” she said, smiling.

Indeed he had told her that. What made him angry then? Undoubtedly, he had an unknown area from which all these conflicting feelings flowed.

He looked at her after regaining his calm.

“Yes,” he answered.

He was thinking for a moment then said, while fussing with the pages of the book, “What kept you from reading further?”

“Boredom,” she said with her head bowed.

“It’s not a boring book. As God is my witness, I woke up in the middle of the night to read it and sleep could not overcome me when I had it in hand.”

“It doesn’t surprise me. You like biographies of monks and people of solitude, but what on earth can incite me to read pages filled with descriptions of desert hermits living in the bowels of sand with scorpions and snakes and wasting their youthful lives with specters of angels and ghosts?” she said with a strange smile.

She looked around her involuntarily, slowly examining the place. Her eyes quickly fell on piles of old books, arranged in rows like graves in a cemetery made up of thoughts without skulls and souls without bodies. Then on the closed window, blocking the sun and the air. It looked like the opening of a well or a small window in a monastery. Then on that green lamp, with its lighted wings illuminating his dark life, like a gentle angel, but preying meanwhile on his beautiful nights, one by one, like a frightening demon.

After touring the place with her eyes, she focused them on him.

Feeling their rays penetrating his soul, he bowed his head.

Silence reigned. She broke it: “I’m beginning to have doubts . . .” Her voice was low as though she was speaking to herself.

He lifted his head and felt himself shiver. He wanted to ask her about what she meant, but she was quicker to speak.

“Do you remember the first time I came here when I saw no sunlight in this place and asked you if it was lighted enough for you?”

“Yes I remember,” he answered, without catching her drift.

“Do you recall your answer to me then?”

“No, I do not.”

“You said then ‘our inner light is always enough.’”

“This is correct,” he said as if attesting to an axiom or a heavenly revelation.

“No it is not!” she returned.

He gazed at her in wonder. She saw his eyes widen.

“Are you surprised by what I’ve just said? I guess you’ll be more surprised when I tell you something else,” she said, smiling.

“What is that?”

“Something that has never crossed your mind.”

“Then say it quickly.”

“I hope that you will honor me by coming to watch me play tennis tomorrow morning.”

He gazed at her to see if she was really serious. She looked at him afraid he would get angry. He thought about the matter and what he should say to her. He decided that, regardless of anything, he would not allow himself to get angry and would handle the affair in a delicate and easy way.

“What do you mean, Miss?”

She looked at him with wide eyes.

“Are my words that vague and indiscernible to you in this dark place?”

“Without a doubt.”

She gave him a strange look.

“Isn’t strange for someone like you used to living in a closed and dark place to say that?”

Her words shocked him. But she quickly gestured with her hand in the room saying, “I only meant this, of course.”

He didn’t bother to say anything and remained motionless. He looked at her and contemplated whether her words were as simple and innocent as they seemed or whether she meant something else by them. If it was the latter, then it would be a great surprise for him that he would need to carefully interpret her words and to find out about who taught her symbolism in the first place.

He had to be careful, though, not to conclude that she was going one way or the other. He had to learn how to distrust his suspicions, for this was not the first time things got mixed up in his head. He had a history of creating ghosts from real things, and his mind was full of creatures, some were real and others lived only in novels. Different worlds, each with its own states, bathed in the depths of his self, and many suns rose and went down. His secluded soul orbited in a nebulous path, far from that of the earth. The result was that, at times, he was distanced from reality and tended to see the world as if through a crystal ball, held by the hand of a magician over the smoke of incense and the clouds of illusion.

He thought he was that magician and that he created the crystal ball with his own hands. He created another world in his mind similar to the real one and held the two worlds in the palm of his hand. But as he began to juggle them he confused one for the other. No longer could he tell the world of illusion from reality. This was his greatest catastrophe and the indignation inflicted on every magician.

He went on daydreaming in this fashion that he almost forgot that the girl was still there. But her soft voice brought him back to consciousness.

“You haven’t given me your answer yet. Are you coming to watch me play tomorrow?”

“To watch you tomorrow?”

“Playing tennis, as I told you.”

“Oh, . . . ”

“This is not an answer,” she said smiling.

“I congratulate you and myself on this great success! You’re working to take me out to the world of play as if my failure to win you over to the world of intellect was not enough ” he said angrily.

It surprised him to hear her laugh. She continued to laugh happily and joyfully until she nearly made him do the same. But he controlled himself at once, for fear of compromising his respectability, serious nature, the loftiness of their relationship, and the noble purpose of his effort. He asked her in somewhat determined voice, “Tell me, how did the idea of asking me out first dawn on you? And what motivated you to ask me today? And how dare you ask me in matters of this sort and why?”

She interrupted him: “The reason is simple.”

She fell silent as if thinking about something, but he urged her to go on, “What is that simple reason?”

She raised her head.

“Those pages I read in *Thais* made me understand that the monk Paphnutius took the initiative in going to the beautiful woman’s court to rescue her. You too must do that with me. You should descend into my court to raise me up, as messengers and prophets had done. They descend to the level of the people so that the people can ascend with them to heaven afterwards. This is the way it is. Don’t wait for me to ascend to you before you come down to take my hand.”

The Monk-Philosopher couldn’t believe his ears. He got mixed up, thinking that it was his inner self echoing the words and pouring them into his ears. But he realized that the girl’s lips were moving and her voice was as pure and clear as the water flowing out from a spring.

He was really surprised to hear her words. He wondered how her lips, accustomed only to lipstick, could utter such serious words. Messengers and prophets, he thought, must leave their heavenly world and descend to earth to rescue humanity.

Such is the strength of the prophets and messengers and such are the harsh experiences and difficult tests they are destined to pass. A messenger ought to mix with people and to pass by their filth, as sunrays pass through earthworms and dust mites but remain nonetheless pure and bright. A messenger, above all, penetrates the hearts of things and beings and fills them with energy and power before he ascends back to heaven as pure as when he came down after spreading purity and light on earth.

A true messenger is gentle as light and light as air. He must have been made of a heavenly substance because he always ascends back to heaven. As for messengers who descend to earth but fail to make it back to heaven, they are victims of earth's vengeance, treachery, shining beauty, and seductive smile. Earth makes these saviors of mankind fall in its snare, rolls them in its mud, and then ridicules them for having dusted and stained their sacred vestments and white wings!

This contemplation made the image of monk Paphnutius surface again in the mind of the Monk-Philosopher. He recalled Paphnutius's tragedy and his eventual fall because of his sinful passion for Thaïs and her ascendance to spiritual purity and sainthood.

Paphnutius was a misguided believer, the Monk-Philosopher thought.

He let the girl go on that day without accepting the invitation. He made it clear to her that he would not leave his place or books for anything; that whatever good reason she had, he couldn't either go out with a girl or watch her play tennis; that their relationship should not and ought not go beyond the noble reason for which she came: discussing matters of intellect.

### **The Husband**

Two days had elapsed since the girl's last visit. There was a knock at the Monk-Philosopher's door. It wasn't her scheduled day. He wondered who was at the door and invited the caller in. A good-looking, elegant, and cheerful middle-aged gentleman entered. Everything in that young man invited respect, liking, and companionship. The Monk-Philosopher greeted him and offered him a seat.

"You don't know me, but I've known you for a long time through your books. I'm not sure what delayed my visit to you until now, but honesty compels me to say that the credit in urging me to come here goes to another person."

The host gave the young man an inquiring look. The guest continued, "It goes to my wife."

The Monk-Philosopher immediately began to draw the connection but thought it was wise to wait.

"Am I honored to have her too among my readers?"

"The most enthusiastic of them!"

The Monk-Philosopher looked surprised.

"How so?"



“It’s a long story. Suffice to say she always hated reading, but a few weeks ago she began to read at an astonishing rate. She read *Thais* in three nights,” the husband said, smiling.

The Monk-Philosopher controlled himself so that his face wouldn’t show signs of surprise. She had lied to him, then, when she returned the book and said she had read only a few pages. She had lied to him, too, when she alleged she was only a fiancée. Why had she done that? The Monk-Philosopher’s reflections were interrupted when the husband continued, “She is now reading your entire collection and is nearly finished. She discusses your books with me, causing me embarrassment sometimes, and asks me questions about you which I cannot answer. Yesterday, when I told her that I have never seen you, she made fun of me and got angry and wouldn’t cheer up until I promised her I would come see you and establish some kind of a relationship.”

“I’m glad to know you, but may I ask: has your wife seen me before?”

“I don’t believe so.”

The Monk-Philosopher marveled at such an answer, for he now knew she did not tell her husband about her visits to him. How strange of her, he thought. But he kept everything to himself and turned to the husband, “What is the secret behind her reading lately after a long avoidance?”

“I don’t know. It puzzles me.”

“Yes, it puzzles me too,” the Monk-Philosopher said in a low voice with his head down.

The husband gave him an interrogatory look.

“You too?”

“Yes, because one doesn’t fall in love with books over night.”

“My wife is quite intelligent and determined.”

“This is not enough to explain her change.”

A particular thought crossed the Monk-Philosopher’s mind. He hurried to ask the husband.

“Have you seen her reading anything else besides *Thais* and my own?”

“No, she only read and discussed those with me.”

Only then did the Monk-Philosopher begin to realize—or at least he thought—the real reason behind the woman’s reading frenzy. She wished to uncover something. Ah, how true of woman! She can do wonder when her curiosity is aroused, he thought. Now he understood everything. He succeeded by chance and at an unbelievable speed in putting her on the right track when he least expected it.

He should have known from the beginning that the best way to get a person to like reading is to arouse his personal curiosity. A child will work harder at reading a letter if he is told it has news about presents and toys to be given to him and information that will make him happy. But learning to read for mere intellectual and aesthetic pleasure is difficult and requires time and practice before its faculty can be developed.

The Monk-Philosopher was still in the dark on one issue: what sort of curiosity drove the girl to read *Thais* in three nights and to read his books with such enthusiasm and vigor? Could it be that she wanted to penetrate the truth of his personality through his books? If so, what was her motive? Did she uncover anything? No, he thought. Yet he supposed her intelligence to be unmatched by any other woman.

The Monk-Philosopher's reflections were interrupted again by the husband, "I should've told you that one reason for my visit is to give you my sincere thanks and to show my gratitude because had it not been for your books . . ."

The Monk-Philosopher raised his head and said in a hurry, "My books haven't done a thing. It is, without a doubt, the lofty self, the delicate feelings, and the noble soul of your wife."

The husband said warmly, "Yes, but this lofty and noble self of hers has not appeared to me or shined in my eyes until lately—that is, until she read your books. My wife, Sir, has been utterly transformed in a matter of weeks. I have always longed to see her rise above the status of a fickle girl, who knew nothing but dressmakers, movies, horse races, tennis, cars, hairdressers and makeup. She was ignorant and her education was useless. She only repeated a few French sentences gracelessly to show off. That poor conceited girl claimed she was civilized because she knew how to hold her lipstick. She knew enough to eat when hungry but was ignorant that her mind ought to be fed too if she was to become a respectable person. I'm discouraged, Sir, by our women today. I have always told my wife that she could win my affection but never the respect she is entitled to, unless her mind knew how to communicate with mine. She will not get to that stage until she reads what I read, tastes what I taste of intellect, and engages in a pleasant and fulfilling conversation as a means of filling the void in our long life."

The husband went on in this fashion while the Monk-Philosopher only pretended to listen, for he was preoccupied with another problem—that the husband didn't know that his wife frequented the place. The Monk-Philosopher continued to reflect: she didn't tell her husband—and that's her business—but what about him? Should he remain silent and

not inform the husband? Does such behavior befit someone of his stature? Would it not be a foolish mistake to tell the husband who might get angry at her and put her in a difficult position for having kept the truth from him? What should he do? Should he wait to discuss the matter with her first? But suppose she told her husband first, wouldn't the husband get mad knowing that he had ample opportunity to tell him?

The Monk-Philosopher cried from the depths of his being, "Why did that woman do that? Woe to women! O, God inspire me to find a way out."

### The Rupture

The husband left without the Monk-Philosopher daring to tell him about his wife's visits. A few days passed, and the day of her appointment came. The Monk-Philosopher looked sullen when he received her. Aware of the reason, she said with a smile, "I know I have been lying to you a lot."

"Lying to me is not of my concern now. The problem is the situation you put me in," he said in somewhat harsh tone.

She knitted her brows, "What situation?"

"Why did you lie to your husband, too, by keeping your visits to me a secret?"

She laughed like a spoiled child who is proud of her frivolous play and unconcerned about her guilt.

"I don't know. I've forgotten to mention to you that, in addition to my passion for tennis, movies, and races, I occasionally like to lie!"

He stared at her in disbelief.

"Glory to God! Has lying become a game of sport?"

She smiled, "Yes, as you can see your task in guiding me is getting difficult."

But he didn't smile. The lines on his forehead cast a shadow of dark anxiety over his face. He couldn't rationalize in his conscience such a vague situation. He lowered his head and said, as if speaking to himself, "What then? What can be done?"

“What a gross misfortune! This lie of mine is, without a doubt, an unforgivable crime,” she said sarcastically.

“Are you being sarcastic on top of it?”

“Pardon me! I see you worried for no reason. I thought you were like me: seeing nothing in life worthy of our sorrow.”

“I envy you for seeing life through your tennis racket.”

“I see life as a witty lie and an interesting game,” she said smiling.

“I’m sorry to say I can’t see it that way. It is a fact and an inevitable duty and a heavy burden I am destined to carry over my shoulders until I breathe my last,” he said as if speaking to himself.

She looked around the room, viewing his books, papers, and desk—all plunged in the darkness of the place.

“Yes, your life is as burdensome as a rock placed on your back and you’ve been ordered to keep walking with it until the end. But . . . Why do you see it that way?”

“I don’t know. You’ve said it yourself: I’ve been ordered to keep walking with it. I’m not free to look at things the same way you do. You live your life, but I live the life of an idea. I don’t necessarily see the sun and the air but I see the idea that moves my existence, like a hand moving a glove. This is what fate meant us to be: you’re as free as a tennis ball fate tosses in the air, and I’m as imprisoned as the racket in her hand which she exploits for her end and never let go until the game is over,” he said as if contemplating.

“That’s right . . . But . . .” she said slowly, as though reflecting on what he just said.

He returned to the subject that had been preoccupying him.

“But, can you tell me why you haven’t told your husband, and how long do you plan to continue?”

A smile returned to her lips. “I will ease your guilty conscience and tell you that my visits to you must remain a secret between you and me.”

“Do you suppose this will ease my conscience?”

She gave him a long look, “Do you really see me committing a sin?”

“Doubtless, and you want me to take part in it.”

“Is it a sin for us to keep this a secret?”

“We shouldn’t keep any secrets from your husband.”

She bowed her head for a moment, then looked up and said, as though speaking to herself, “Don’t I have the right to retain an unknown area of myself? I feel something I’m not sure you’re capable of sharing, only a woman is. A woman must hide something from her husband. It may be a gold bracelet she bought behind his back, a dear memory from the past, or an absurd or noble idea she believes in but does not like to share with anyone. This is how I feel today. My visits to you, my discussions with you, the opinions I reveal, and the few hours we spend exchanging ideas about matters of intellect must be locked away in a box similar to a jewelry box with only two keys: one is with me and the other with you.”

He bowed his head for a while, saying nothing. He thought that, all things considered, the woman had put him in an awkward position. He would have endured the situation had he not seen her husband. But he had seen and known him and expected to see him more and to further develop their relationship. How could he, then, keep up this secrecy? Meanwhile, he must appreciate the woman’s position and respect her wishes

and preserve her lofty imagination, with which she liked always to surround things.

There is no escape from keeping silent, then. He would keep his relationship with her to himself, and since they would visit him at different times in the future, he would treat them as two separate friends of his.

The woman turned to him and said, "There is another matter I better caution you about."

He looked at her anxiously, "What is it?"

"My husband will most certainly invite you to visit us or to watch a game of tennis and will introduce us, so be careful not to let on . . ." she said calmly.

He lost his patience and didn't hear the rest of her words. He released a cry that echoed in the room.

"Listen, Madame! I will not allow this absurdity to go on any further. You undoubtedly frivol and play with me, while I trust your judgment and hold you in high regard."

She blushed, and, like an innocent child who is unaware of her guilt, said, "What have I done? What has angered you?"

He looked sharply at her, "How strange! You don't know what angered me?"

"Are you accusing me of frivolity and playfulness?" she asked in a tone of meekness and coquetry.

He softened his tone, "What is the meaning, then, of your asking me to play a theatrical role the day your husband introduces me to you? Do you really think a serious man like myself would do such a thing? What you see at the movies should not influence your perception of reality or affect the way you judge matters. You, Madame, are still



under the influence of your trivial world and your silly teachers: movies, tennis, and races—all of which still guide your steps in life.

She gave him a look full of admonition, the effect of which he couldn't deny.

"Is this really how you think of me?" she asked.

"Very regretfully, yes!"

"I was under the impression that my visits to you have brought me a few steps up towards you."

"No, Madame, they have brought me down to the very bottom towards you," he said frankly.

She opened her mouth in disbelief. His frankness and rudeness shocked her for the first time.

"Don't you see? Don't you see you're pulling me down?" he continued.

"I have some influence on you, then!" she said with hidden joy and relief.

"A bad one! You have tried to teach me lying and to take me down to tennis courts and to force me into playing some theatrical roles. You have done all this in a short time. Can you see how much you have succeeded?" he said earnestly.

She released a long, soft laugh mixed with the sparkle of pearls shooting out of her mouth and said, "And you? Haven't you succeeded with me in anything?"

"I cannot discern any signs of success at all."

But he suddenly recalled her husband's words that she had read *Thaïs* in three nights and that she bent on reading all his books. Her reading, whatever its motive, is considered a progress at any rate and a step in the right direction, he thought. He wanted

to confirm what her husband had said. So he asked her about it. Her face changed a little, but she regained composure and said, “Who told you I’d read all that?”

“Your husband.”

She looked sharply at him, “Did you believe him?”

He didn’t know what to say. But after giving a thorough thought to the affair, he said to the beautiful woman in a tone of severe seriousness and decisive determination:

“Listen, Madame! I can see things clearer now: it seems to me that you have achieved your goal. Your husband thinks that you have changed and made a habit of reading.

Either you fooled and tricked him and got him to believe in your lie—which is a success in your own way—or you really have changed and begun to appreciate literature, and this is our desire. You don’t need to visit me anymore. Let me wish you the best and thank you for honoring this place with your presence and bid you farewell!”

She looked at his face for a moment and saw his seriousness and the determination in his eyes. She noticed that he turned away from her to his books and intellectual affairs. When she felt that his cold heavens had called him back and his strict world had reclaimed him, she whispered “Farewell” and said no more. Then she picked her gloves and slowly inserted her fingers into them and said, “Thank you.”

She walked to the door and disappeared like a ghost. She left like a dream.

### The Separation

A few days had passed since the beautiful woman's last visit. The Monk-Philosopher went about his usual business. He thought little of her, for he believed in his heart of hearts that she would eventually return—as usual—by the end of the week. The appointed day arrived but she didn't come. He became a little anxious but, remembering she was sometimes behind in her scheduled appointments, his anxiety dissipated. He remembered she had been unhappy the last time she left him. Maybe she meant to be late so that he would feel her anger at him. She would come next week, he thought. But the next week came and she didn't.

His preoccupation with her began to take a new and an unfamiliar turn. He behaved strangely on the days that followed, and his servant noticed the changes in him. Every knock on the door brought a question from the master as to who the caller was. This was the man who was not in the habit of raising his head when reading even if the door collapsed. Now he would scream at the servant periodically, "Go and open the door. I think I hear someone knocking." The servant would go but find no one. If the phone rang, he would jump up and snatch the receiver, only to lay it down momentarily with disappointment. He no longer read the morning mail with his usual care. Instead, he went through the letters quickly looking anxiously for her handwriting. Then he opened the letters with the same quickness hoping to find a message from her.

He went on like that for many days, doing nothing except waiting for her and asking: Why hadn't she come? How could all those weeks pass by without her coming? What has kept her from coming? He would ask himself these questions while staring at the door, anxious to see her figure in the doorway. He waited for the phone to ring, longing to hear her voice. Did he forget he was the one who asked her to leave and never return? Did he really ask her to do that? Did he mean what he said? How astonishing! Was he out of his mind to ask her to leave? Unfortunately he did.

He was reflecting on everything now. It was he who let her know that there was no reason for her visits anymore. He ignored her, then, and went about his business while she waited for a kind word from him, but she had lost hope and left. The last thing he heard from her was a farewell whisper followed by "Thank you."

How could he hope for her return after that? It was impossible to find her today, for he didn't know her name or address or her husband's. Her husband must've mentioned his name to him when he came by, but, as his usual habit, he didn't catch it. Names never stuck with him before a solid relationship had been established. In this particular case, he never thought he would need to maintain his relationship with that lady or with her husband. She was gone for good then, never to return.

He lost her in the air like a tennis ball lost by a reckless hit. Hadn't he told her one day that fate viewed her as a tennis ball and him as racket in its hand, which it exploited for its own end? Why had that merciless fate hit the ball with its racket so hard that he couldn't tell where the ball went? Was it really fate or was it his foolishness that had done it? She was a beautiful thing he was accustomed to seeing, a perfume he was used to smelling, a wonderful toy that made him happy, a gentle spirit that filled his house

with life, and a joyful light that dispelled the darkness of his days. Her weekly visit had become part of his work schedule and its few hours had permeated the depths of his feelings. He used to wait for her. How could he live now without waiting? This idea only cut through his melancholy, like a knife. She denied him even the sweetness of waiting for her. Could his days go on like this, without being able to wait for her?

He spent awful nights with little sleep. Visions of her, wearing the clothes he used to see her in and smelling of her favorite perfume which filled his heart with happiness, passed by his mind during the first round of slumber. Sometimes she appeared in his dreams, as though she was coming to apologize for her long absence. She took off her gloves slowly and looked at him with real affection. The shock of the dream made him open his eyes and remain sleepless till morning. He had never expected or accounted for such a torture. Even reading couldn't save him when he clung to it sometimes. One night, he got up from sleep, terrified. He saw her in his dream knocking at his door. Disappointed and unable to sleep anymore, he turned, as was his usual habit during sleepless nights, to reading books. He picked a book by the Muslim philosopher, Abu Bakr al-Razi, and began to read a page about the author's view of love:

“Given death, separation from the one you love is destined to happen, even if the relationship had been able to sustain the normal mishaps and obstacles in life. If one is to swallow the choking lump and bitterness of separation, the sooner the better. For that which must occur saves people from the fear associated with waiting for it to happen when it actually occurs. In addition, separation is more tolerable at the beginning, when love is still developing and not strong enough to control the individual. Intimacy and passion, joining hands, make separation more difficult. Intimacy as an affliction has a

profound impact on the individual similar to that of passion—and sometimes greater. Brief periods of passion must avoid intimacy if they are to remain brief. Commonsense dictates that the individual must guard against falling in love and must wean himself from its control when he does.

“Plato had used the same argument when one of his students fell in love with a maid and began to miss class. He ordered that the student be brought. When the student appeared before him, Plato asked, ‘Tell me, have you any doubt that someday you will have to be separated from your lover?’

“‘I have no doubt.’

“‘Make that someday today, then, and swallow the bitterness and save yourself the fear of waiting and the difficulty of separation in the future when love gets hold of you and intimacy joins in.’

“‘What you say is right, my wise lord, but I find pleasure in every passing day.’

“‘How can you trust the pleasure the days bring to you without being afraid of the intimacy they work on you? And how can you be sure that separation will occur before love gets hold of you—when your choking will be greater and your bitterness doubled?’

“It is narrated that the student bowed to Plato, invoked the gods for him, and complimented him. The student abandoned his scheme without showing signs of sorrow or passion.”

When The Monk-Philosopher finished reading, he flung the book aside, saying to himself, “Damn those philosophers who consider themselves able to solve the problems of human emotions by offering such good words and strong logic.” He reflected on what he just read and on his relationship with that beautiful woman. His conduct with her was

proper: he kept to the intent of her visits, never deviating from the noble cause for which she came. He never uttered a word or showed a sentiment that he shouldn't utter or show. His behavior toward her was—from beginning to end—in accordance with the words of Abu Bakr al-Razi and Plato. Furthermore, he severed his relationship with her immediately when he felt that intimacy began to take control and when serious matters were turned into trivial. But the result was her leaving him. Could it be that he was unaware of his true feelings toward her in the first place? Or was he somewhat aware but thought the affair unworthy of further thinking or quick decision? Suppose that his feelings toward her did not formulate until he performed his duty by putting an end to their relationship, what fault of his was that? What could he have done differently to be in accordance with the opinions of al-Razi and Plato?

Of course, no one gave him answers to these questions. He didn't need any. All he needed was someone to comfort him. Undoubtedly, he did everything by the book—the philosophers' book, that is. But these philosophers slept in the bellies of their books, wrapped in the pages of their wonderful logic, and left him sleepless, his eyelids red with lack of rest and his heart burning with grief.

**Insomnia**

More weeks slipped by, their nights made bright by sleeplessness and their days made dark by despair. His condition remained unchanged. He couldn't take her out of his mind no matter how hard he tried, for everything around him reminded him of her. The door she used to come through, the seat she used to sit in, the window through which she longed for sunlight, and the tightly packed bookcase and paper-strewn desk that she looked at. Even the walls recalled echoes of her gentle laughter, lies, and conversations—which he'd never taken seriously.

He never realized that he would miss her conversations someday so intensely that he would pride himself on every word and cling to each rise and fall of her voice. His trivial and sometimes cold conversations with her became precious now. They became the food on which his soul survived. He poured them out of his memory everyday and examined them anew, word by word, like someone emptying a box of pearls, one by one, to have a chance to look at their luster. He reflected on them, like a camel ruminating its old food as he crosses the bare desert writhing with pain. This was his behavior in the long weeks when he completely lost hope of seeing her. At times, however, he deeply regretted wasting his time on such reflections.



Had he known that she wouldn't be back, he would have left her with wonderful words and surrendered completely to her. But his conduct and lofty behavior with her made him proud because, being a married woman, no improper relationship was supposed to take place between them. In the depths of his heart, perhaps all he needed was to have a warm and deep friendship with her. But who could guarantee that his ambition would stop there? He had no doubt that he made the right decision by lowering the curtain on this episode at the right time, for he is a man of honor and could not divert a married woman from her sacred duty towards her husband. He did what he had to do. No one in his shoes would have acted differently.

The pain he had suffered afterwards was hidden. It was unknown to others. It caused no one harm and violated no one's rights. But since he was allowed to have hidden pain, why not be permitted to have hidden love—invisible and undetected by others as well?

He woke up in the middle of the night, turned the light on, and sat at his desk determined to converse with his lover and to maintain his lofty relationship with her spirit, which made him sleepless and never parted with him during the day. He wanted to write a few pages to her. Undoubtedly, she would never read them. Perhaps he would write them to ease his pain or to glorify his love for her without sacrificing his principles.

\* \* \*

The clock struck two after midnight. He began to write this letter to her.

*My friend,*

*If you only know what happened to me after you had left. Of course you're in a deep slumber by now, unaware of a sleepless man because of you. And who is he? He is the man who let you go, pretending not to care*

*whether or not you returned. I can see the surprise in your eyes, once you know this. But you will never know. You must never know. All I want now is to talk with you a while. It's not important that you say anything in return. I can see you smiling when my words please you and frowning when they do not. You're here in front of me, following my words with your face, eyelashes, glances, hair, and mouth.*

*I will tell you plenty of what goes through my mind, without being worried about causing you boredom, for this is the virtue of conversing with someone on silent paper. It can give me the false impression that you're listening to me without being bored and have compassion for me. Compassion! What makes me utter such a word today? I haven't said it for a long time. It seems that my life is darker than I ever imagined!*

*We men of intellect are accustomed to crossing the hot desert never aware of the hardship of the journey until we come across an oasis with shade. After resting in the shade for a while, we ask ourselves, 'How have we endured all this hardship until now?' But before long, our duty calls upon us to march on. So we pull our bodies up and throw ourselves into that hell once again. My friend, be my consolation and let your spirit walk by my side in my lonely road. My road in life cannot even compare to a desert road, for the desert has at least the pleasure and serenity of silence whereas my road is full of lowness and ugliness, and I swim in a sea raging with absurdity and baseness. Sometimes I become frustrated with myself and think, 'Why don't I quit such a life and lead a normal one, like*

*the rest of humans?' But I cannot, because I want to dream of beautiful things. There is a price to be paid, however: my endurance of people's ridicule, to say the least. Trust me, my friend, I gain nothing at times but people's criticism as though I have committed an unforgivable sin. You probably have read a lot about what has been written about me in the papers and have seen the image they created of me from time to time. It used to bother me at first, but I'm used to it now. This is the way it should be. I shouldn't put too much trust in my critics because they understand things only as they see them. They have been always like that. Every time I read their critique of me, I smile and say: 'This is the only image they are able to create and see of me.'*

*We men of intellect are in continuous war, not only defending our art and high ideals but with those for whom we dedicate our lives to giving something beautiful.*

*I want my first letter to be brief, lest you find me boring. I value your spirit as your real person, because it is all I have of you at the moment and must not deny it to myself. I wish you a good night's sleep.*

He flung the pen aside and surrendered himself to sleep, uncertain whether he would actually fall asleep.

**Letters to Her Spirit**

His letters to her followed in succession over the upcoming days.

Morning of February 14

*My friend,*

*What a beautiful morning! I've never seen such blue skies. Everything I see around me today looks like the work of some serene angels, joyfully painting with their merry brush a picture, bright in its blueness and dewy in its greenness. That aquamarine up there fills my soul with heavenly serenity. I don't usually see the colors or hear the chanting around me, but now I do.*

*I'm sure my servant is puzzled by my change, for the sound of my neighbor's caged canary no longer bothers me. I cheerfully listen to it, for we're intimate friends now. We understand each other. I won't let my servant close the window between us, not even when I'm working, because I suspect that that bird, too, has something to tell me about you.*

Evening of February 25

*My friend,*

*I'm sitting this evening on my veranda watching the full moon. It seems to move with the passing clouds. Why is that disk of light racing through space? Do you suppose it has a lover's rendez-vous? Looking down on the city, I see Cairo calm and sleepy at this hour of night. Its buildings support and embrace one another, like chicks in a nest, by the Muqattam.<sup>3</sup> Some of their inhabitants have already closed the windows and surrendered to slumber, others have stayed up and left them open, lighting up the darkness of the night. I wonder which of these homes is yours and what are you doing now? I'm sure you're at your happy husband's side, caring for him with that tenderness I know so well in you. You always remind me of the ideal wife, the one I always wanted but have been denied by circumstance.*

*I see in you every great wife who was able to make her husband happy throughout history. I was just reading about Karl Marx. When his people saw his socialist writings endangering the security of their society, he was exiled. His wife determined to leave with him and to share his fate. Aware of her obligation as a wife, she became even more determined when members of her family attempted to make her stay behind to avoid her husband's unknown fate and obscured destiny. They both went to France. But no sooner had they set foot on its soil than they were forced to leave. They then left for England. But their homelessness, along with the poverty and hopelessness that often go with it, never shook his belief in his ideas*

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<sup>3</sup> The hills above Cairo.

*or her belief in him. I don't know why you come to mind every time I think about that virtuous lady?*

*Yesterday I reread Andre Maurois's biography about Disraeli<sup>4</sup> only to refresh my memory about his wife, Mary Anne. That they were happy during their initial years of marriage doesn't surprise me, for this is normally the case. During those years, Mary Anne had performed her duty as a wife, like a woman who knew how to make her husband live in a paradise of happiness. Her husband badly needed that. He felt that she only lived for him. He needed her most during his down moments, which were many, when he felt a failure. She consoled and supported him and eased his pain.*

*The pages of the book I like best are those which deal with her life during her illness. She had known for years that she had a fatal disease, stomach cancer, but she fought heroically to hide it from her husband so that she wouldn't upset him. She endured her illness so she could be by his side whenever her social duty called upon her. She carried a large photograph of him on her bosom, like a decorated soldier carrying his badge of honor. Old, weak, and sick, the ruined couple couldn't take care of each other anymore. They exchanged messages from their separate rooms. He wrote to her once: 'Pardon my handwriting, for I'm writing while flat on my back. The message you've just sent me was by far the funniest and most pleasurable I've gotten in my whole life. I see that our*

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), British Prime Minister and member of the Tory party. He dictated British policy towards the Ottomans during the Eastern Crisis of 1875-1878.

*house has become like a hospital. But I prefer living in a hospital with you than in a palace with someone else.'*

*She used to tell her friends, 'Because of his goodness, my life with him has been nothing but a prolonged moment of happiness.'*

*He once commented, 'I haven't felt one moment of discontent with her during the thirty years of our marriage.'*

*Eventually, She became very sick and couldn't hide it anymore. But their daily home correspondence continued. He wrote to her once: 'I have nothing to say to you except that I love you . . .'*

*She responded: 'My dearest, I miss you terribly and am forever indebted to your goodness and everlasting love.'*

*There was no hope for her recovery for her stomach rejected all food. For the first time fear of the impending tragedy was written on Disraeli's face. Eventually, his wife died on December 15, 1872.*

*Among her papers, they found one that read: 'My dear husband: If I die before you, please order that the two of us be buried together in one grave. Now may God bless you, my good and dear husband. You have been the best of husbands to me! Don't live by yourself. I wish with all my heart that you'll find a wife as devoted to your service as I was.'*

*Disraeli's tragedy left a mark on his friends and enemies alike. Even his tough political opponent, Gladstone, forgot his rancor and wrote to Disraeli: 'We married in the same year, as I recall, and have enjoyed precious marital happiness for about one-third of a century. I who have*

*been spared the tragedy befallen you can understand . . . ' He went on to assure him that he really felt his pain and was sincere about it.*

*After his wife's death, Disraeli's days become difficult to endure. Had she been alive to see what he was going through, she would have been proud of the troubles she had spared him when alive. For throughout his marriage, he had enjoyed both a perfect home and peace of mind. He used to say with bitterness: 'No matter how urgent or difficult a matter was, she was able to confront it. There was not a single difficulty or problem that she couldn't solve. I know of no other woman who could make me as comfortable or happy.'*

*Thus Mary Anne couldn't protect her great man anymore. With her departure, he lost his sense of home, that once warm place where his body and soul used to find comfort and where criticism was turned into praise and rebuke into kindness and consolation. Home was no longer that sweet place it once was. He would order his driver to take him home. But, remembering what it was like without her, he would burst into tears. Had it not been for some of his compassionate and caring friends, he would have been a wreck. But friends' care, even at its best, cannot substitute for a woman's compassion. In the silence of his room and the darkness of loneliness, Disraeli sat with the memory of her joyful voice.*

*This is the gist of those pages that shook my soul. I share them with you so that you may love Mary Anne and see yourself in her as I have.*



Night of March 19

*My friend,*

*There is another woman I love enormously because she is like you, but I think you're prettier. (Statues and temples reliefs of her do not convey her natural beauty but only her artistic one). She is the pharaonic Isis.<sup>5</sup> I don't wish to examine the religious and spiritual side of her legend. I'm only interested in her as a wife. Her loyalty to her husband is, I believe, one of the miracles of the human heart.*

*Osiris was the king of ancient Egypt who turned it to a civilized nation in a relatively short time. During his reign, savage customs disappeared and cannibals ceased to exist, giving way to security and the worshipping of the gods. He drew laws and taught his people agriculture, handicrafts and home building. When he realized his dream of a civilized society, he sought to extend that civilization to other parts of the world. This made him absent from Egypt from time to time, leaving his wife in charge of the kingdom. She followed in his footsteps, causing people to love them both and to consider them holy.*

*But the eyes of evil never sleep! Seth<sup>6</sup>, the king's brother and mortal enemy, had wished to usurp his brother's throne during his absence. But when he couldn't, he became disappointed and, driven by spite, devised a plot to get rid of his brother. He waited until the king came back from*

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<sup>5</sup> Goddess of fertility and the wife of Osiris, the first king of pharaonic Egypt and god of death. Her name often surfaces in Arabic writings as symbol of a woman's loyalty to her husband.

<sup>6</sup> Symbol of evil and god of Egypt's barren and sun-baked desert.

*abroad and invited him to a banquet of delicacies, prepared specially for the occasion. The king went to the banquet against his wife's wishes, for she often warned him against his brother's ill-will. But the king, whose heart knew no evil, was incapable of detecting evil in the hearts of others.*

*Osiris went to his opponent's banquet. When the eating and drinking were over, Seth brought in a beautifully crafted box made specially to fit his brother's body. When Seth saw his brother's eyes shine with admiration for the box, he looked at his conspiring guests and said, 'Whoever fits in the box, it shall be his.' Guests took turns, each lying uselessly in the box. When the king's turn came up, he cheerfully got up and lied in the box, never suspecting his brother's treachery. All the attendants pounced on the box, threw down the lid, and sealed it with hot lead. Then Seth ordered the box to be thrown near the mouth of the Nile. Thus was sealed Osiris' fate. Some historians say this had occurred when he was twenty-eight years of age, others say in the twenty-eighth year of his reign.*

*So far, this ancient legend is no different from many others, even legends of modern Europe. Shakespeare's Hamlet, for instance, is based on a brother's plot to kill his other brother and usurp the throne. That disloyal brother conspired with his brother's wife, the queen, to murder her husband. Then the two went about their sinful passion. Consider what Isis did, by contrast.*

*No sooner had she learned about what Seth had done to her husband than she cut off a lock of her hair, put on her mourning clothes, and left the palace, her throne and all her worldly possessions behind, and set out roaming in search of the box. She did all that because she believed that the dead would never rest until buried properly.*

*She searched many places for many days, asking every passer-by about that beautifully decorated box. But no one had seen it. She didn't give up and resumed her search, sometimes asking people, other times beseeching and entreating them. But her effort was useless. She finally met some children along the riverbank who told her that they had seen the box at the mouth of the river. She went there again to search and investigate, but it was of no use. Fate sent her some sailors who told her that they had heard that the sea had carried the box to the coast of some remote kingdom. She went there but found nothing. Exhausted and filled with sorrow, she sat on a rock by the beach. There, upon hearing her story, an old fisherman told her that the waves had thrown the box into the middle of a small henna tree; that the small tree had grown wonderfully and tremendously, concealing the box inside its enormous trunk; that the king of that nation had ordered the trunk of this marvelous tree cut down and used it as a supporting pillar for the roof of his castle.*

*When the old man finished his story, she slowly got up and walked to the palace. Afraid to go in, she sat by a water fountain nearby. When the king's daughters went out for a stroll that afternoon, they met and talked*

*with her. She was nice to them, braiding their hair and perfuming their clothes with her breath which smelled better than flowers.*

*When the girls returned to the palace, their mother, the queen, wondered at the fragrance emanating from their hair and clothes and, after the girls told her, ordered her servants to bring that beautiful stranger to the palace to honor her. The queen invited Isis to stay with them as a babysitter for the young prince. Only then did Isis disclose her story and ask them for the pillar. They pitied her and hurried to split open the trunk and bring out the box from its core.*

*No sooner had she seen the body of her husband than she screamed, her cries erupting from her lungs like an active volcano. She sailed with the box back to Egypt, where she reopened it and poured more bitter mourning on the remains of her husband, the king of that land. She then hid the box until she could make proper burial arrangements.*

*But the eyes of evil were watching her again. Seth was able to find the box and, inspired by spite and anger, removed his brother's remains, cut them into fourteen pieces and scattered them all over Egypt.*

*When Isis learned about the new catastrophe, she took to the Nile in a canoe made of papyrus sticks in search of her beloved husband's mutilated remains. Her search took years during which time she never despaired. Every time she found a piece of her darling, she buried it on the spot and built a monument there. This explains the existence of many burial sites of Osiris in Egypt today.*

*Thus was the behavior of Isis. You would have done the same had you been in her shoes, because you, my dear friend, undoubtedly have the same loving and loyal heart.*

Evening of March 19

*My friend,*

*I've never stopped blaming myself for behaving in the fashion I did with you, and for failing to see the noble purpose of your visits to me. The mere desire of being near a man who lives with books is in itself the idea of a refined woman. It's not always easy for a woman to enjoy the company of a man who leads a life similar to mine. Strangely, you were able to put up with me wonderfully, but I was the one who lacked gravity and patience and hurried to sever that unique and beautiful relationship between us. Here I am deprived of the only beauty who had the courage to penetrate my dusty room. I have, with my own hands, shut the window which brought your light into my life. Oh, if you only know how dark my life has been!*

*Imagine the moon divorcing earth someday for another planet and leaving us forever without its light! What would life on earth be like? If we were able to live, it would be a life devoid of beauty, love, and imagination. What then is the value of such life? Have you finally realized what I lost when you left me?*

Morning of March 21

*My friend,*

*Every time I think about your boldness in striking up an acquaintance with me and your interest in my conversation, I find the whole affair utterly incredible. For only a rare number of women can bear living with a man who devotes his life to ideas. These rare women are, therefore, worthy of respect. I have already talked to you about some of them, but there is one more I'm sure you've heard about and held in high esteem.*

*This woman is Khadijah, the first wife of the Prophet Mohamed. She comes to mind and stays there every time I think about the ideal wife—one who picks out a struggling husband and stands by him during defeat as well as victory and during despair as well as hope. One who supports him, shares his blows, stays up nights with him, gets stained with blood along with him, dresses his wounds and spares no effort in giving him comfort and money until he finally emerges victorious. Khadijah did all of that. She loved Mohamed and he loved her. Before he met her at the age of twenty-five, his heart did not know love, for the quiet youth kept aloof from women and devoted his life to deep reflection and herding. Until that time, he wasn't interested in diversion or women. Absolute chastity was his predominant virtue. His disinterest, knowledge, patience and humbleness distinguished him from other youth and made people call him 'the faithful.'*

*What then had preoccupied young Mohamed at that age since diversion and women had no place in his life? Had the anticipation, if any, of his great future been enough to keep him busy? Undoubtedly, for,*

*like many men of greatness throughout history, his youthful mind was filled with dreams and high ideals which took the place of fun and play. All young men live with the image of a beautiful woman, except those awaiting great revelations. They live with the image of future glory.*

*That future glory was what preoccupied Mohamed and made him indifferent to women until he met Khadijah. Maybe he would have remained a bachelor if she hadn't made the first move by touching his shoulder and causing him to look at her. For everything around him suggested that marriage was the last thing on his mind. Reflections and lofty dreams took up all his time.*

*Indeed it was noble of Khadijah, a woman of honor and wealth, to make the first move at that poor orphan, particularly because she had previously rejected some of the wealthiest and most honorable men. She secretly sent her servant, Nafissa, to get young Mohamed's consent to marry her. She eventually married him and lived through the time of doubt and anxiety, when the revelations first came to him, and through his misery and unhappiness afterwards. She was at home one day when he came in shaking with fear and saying, 'Warm me! Warm me!' She covered his body compassionately and said anxiously, 'Have mercy on me and tell me what the matter is.'*

*'Every time I'm alone, I hear a voice behind me calling my name. Then I run as fast as I can. I'm beginning to be worried, especially with*

*the light and voice I keep seeing and hearing. I'm afraid I may turn into a priest, whom I detest more than a pagan.'*

*'Be easy on yourself! God will never disappoint an affectionate, truthful, honest, and honorable man like you.'*

*Unlike his people, who ridiculed, swore at, discredited and hurt him, and poured dust upon his head when he first disclosed his revelations, Khadijah stood by him and believed in him and his message. Horrified, he came to her one day and told her that an angel had descended from heaven to converse with him, but that he was not sure whether it was an angel or the devil.*

*She wanted to get to the bottom of it, so she said, 'Let me know when that friend of yours comes to see you again.'*

*When Gabriel descended, Prophet Mohamed told her. She then took off her veil and asked Mohamed, 'Do you still see him now?' Mohamed looked around but saw no one. He replied, 'No.' She screamed with joy, 'Keep to your course and announce the good news for he is an angel. Had he been the devil, he would not have been ashamed to face me without my veil.'*

*Until her last days, Khadijah stood by him and believed in his message. When her death became eminent, Mohamed's enemies whispered the news joyfully. Abu Lahab, Mohamed's worst enemy, couldn't conceal his delight. He went around saying, 'Very soon the woman who offered him support and glorified him will go.'*



*She finally gave up her soul, that which had been the fountain of love for the Prophet Mohamed all those years. That love remained very much alive after her death. No other woman was able to take her place in his heart, even his most beloved wife, 'Aysha,'<sup>7</sup> who teased him one day saying, 'Am I not the best of women to you?' To which he quickly replied, 'What about Khadijah?' She said, 'Quit talking about that old, dry-mouthed woman. She's been dead for long now. Besides, God has replaced her with her better.'*

*It was a slip of a tongue the effect of which on him she could not fathom until she noticed his strong anger. He became angry as never before and got up to leave saying, 'By God, I haven't seen any better than her, for she believed me when everyone else accused me of lying and gave me money when people denied it from me.' Ayesha suppressed her anger and whispered, 'As if there were no woman on the face of the earth like Khadijah!' She is right indeed, because very few women are like Khadijah. A rare woman is the greatest gift from God.*

*My dear! If I'm asked about you, I will reply, 'She is everything in my life.'*

Evening of April 22

*My friend,*

*I would exchange years of my life for a framed photograph of you to place on my desk and look at it morning and evening. But no! Even if I*

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<sup>7</sup> Daughter of Abu Bakr, the first male convert to Islam.

*get your photograph I cannot place it as such, for I know of a better place to put it: my heart, where no one else can see it or take it. Now if you'll allow me to put down my pen and save you the trouble of a long letter. I'm going to sit silently on the veranda this beautiful night and think only about you.*

Morning of May 23

*My friend,*

*Am I destined to never hear a word about you while you know at least what is written about me through the papers? This thought has been bothering my mind every morning when I carefully read the morning papers and magazines. I pause now at anything, even a word, that concerns me in the papers and think about the possibility of you reading it. The mere thought fills me with embarrassment.*

*Forgive me, my dear. I believe I'm unworthy of you, for you're a virtuous lady, highly regarded by society, while society holds me accountable for every word I say and every gesture I make.*

*I wish I were able to convince you to change your mind about me. Trust me, there is a big difference between my inner self and the outer one. I'm a lot better on the inside than on the outside, because my inner self is my own and of my making while my outer self belongs to others and is created by circumstance. I only care about the truth of my inner self, and I let people clothe my outer self with whatever garments they wish, for I*

*cannot forge a wonderful appearance with my own hands. I'm not an actor and never have been.*

*Believe me, I'm pure, lofty, and majestic on the inside. But the minute I step out into society, all these virtues disappear and I began to be clothed in absurd clothes I don't know how they were cast on me.*

*I wonder sometimes at people who have the ability to pose as saints in front of others while they're entirely dissolute on the inside. I, on the contrary, wear a lasting smile and look humorous on the outside but am serious and determined within. All I care about is that I'm honest with myself. That is all. I care only about whatever lives in the depths of my soul. That which floats on the surface doesn't concern me. Who would believe that my love for you is a living being? No one, not even you, sees this love which illuminates the bottom of my soul, like the luster of a pearl.*

\* \* \*

He continued to write to her in this fashion throughout the summer and autumn of that year. He wrote and piled the letters on top of each other without hearing about her or seeing her. He had hoped that fate would facilitate a meeting between the two while he was in Alexandria during the summer. But fate denied him that chance. Nonetheless, he had never lost hope of seeing her some day, for it was impossible for him to believe that whatever was between them would end in such a way. But that was only the pulse of his inner feelings, no more no less. Such feelings entertain every heart in search of a remote lover. They are the whisper of the eternal hope found in every human being.

### **Finger of Fate**

Winter came. The Monk-Philosopher felt the need for warmth and yearned for the sun. He always feared winter because he couldn't tolerate its coldness when combined with that of his loneliness. Her spirit comforted him during the other three seasons, but winter nights were long. Nothing was more unbearable for him than the combination of winter and separation. It was difficult to stay at home at this time of year, for everything around him dripped like rain with the bitterness of her memory: the way she used to take off her coat, gloves and hat, and let her hair go free. He thought about leaving the place for a while and lodging at some hotel where he could relax and forget about her "ghost."

The idea of leaving home pleased him. Consequently, he jumped at once to pack his suitcase and headed south of Cairo to Helwan, where he checked into the Grand Hotel. The weather was refreshing, the air dry and the temperature moderate. At the new place, he didn't alter his daily routine. He went out in the morning heading for the far end of the city, passing empty roads and silent houses. Helwan is indeed the city of calm. Everything there was quiet, as though placing its forefinger on its mouth so that no sound would disturb the residents and guests who went there to relax and recreate. The desert at the outskirts of the city was his favorite spot. He sat there for hours, watching how the ball of the sun played with the hills of sand, like a water nymph playing with the ocean waves. Sometimes the sun would turn the sand into gold, at other times it would

disappear behind gray clouds and turn the sand pale, as if the sand were afraid of her disappearance. At times the sun slowly tore off the clouds which covered it and sent down its rays like disconnected smiles, leaving the sand speckled with the shadows of the tiny patches of clouds.

When nature cut off its courtship by ending the play of light and shadow, the Monk-Philosopher got up and returned to the hotel, where he sat in a comfortable bamboo chair on the terrace, overlooking the garden, and drank his tea until it became dark or cold. Then he would get up and go to the hotel lobby or to his room upstairs. He always walked and sat alone. His greetings to those who knew him were brief and frustrating for anyone who wished to befriend him or to take him out of his seclusion. Even in the dining room he would sit by himself at a small corner table.

He went on like that for two days. On the third day, an unanticipated incident took place. On his way back from his morning outing, he saw a man sitting and reading in the lobby. No sooner had he glanced at the man than he became confused. His heart leaped and the blood rushed to his face. He imagined that everyone in the lobby was listening to his heartbeat. Afraid of showing signs of his affliction, he hurriedly stumbled to his room.

How strange! The woman for whom he waited for so long was about to be found. In the hotel lobby, finger of fate pointed in her direction through the image of that seated man. The Monk-Philosopher had seen that man only once, but the man's image and personality were imprinted forever in his mind. How could he forget that man—*her husband*? Yes, this was the same husband who came to see him a year ago and who conversed with him about her—a conversation he had not forgotten and never would.

“If her husband is here, then she must be here,” he thought. “She is here! She is here!” he went on repeating many times while in his room. His confusion subsided a little. Joy, or rather something like joy mixed with fear, took its place. Of course, he longed to see her, but he felt apprehensive. He at once wished and feared to see her, but didn’t know exactly why he was afraid.

Maybe he was afraid of his inability to remain composed when he finally met her, thus allowing her to read the confusion on his face and to know his secret. She would discover at once that the man was different from the one she had left about a year ago: that cold and quiet man whose attention was diverted away from her by his books, papers, and thoughts. With her feminine instinct she would, without a doubt, detect the new man in him. For a woman need not talk to a man to leave impression on him. She can tell, with her head bowed, who glanced at her and at what part of her body. She is like the type of flower that knows too well which insects are seduced by its colors and so opens up to receive them then closes when they become within its grasp. Like a woman, that flower acknowledges its weakness to attract other insects and lets them pass by her, as though it’s diverted from them by play.

Such thoughts had never crossed his mind. But since he was about to confront her, he began, for the first time, to have a clear understanding of woman’s hidden dangers. That hidden sense in her would tear his mask and uncover his real emotions.

He feared the mere idea of meeting with her because he now revered her. The separation from, longing for, and dreams about her had gradually woven an image of her in his mind unlike that of any person. He forgot all about the details of her looks and

remembered only her ideal beauty and congenital majesty. To him, she was more than a living being; she was lofty and abstract and no longer real. She was a poem and a legend.

His meeting with her must be different this time, he thought. Undoubtedly, he would show her more respect, which might frighten her and make her wonder. His encounter with her should be like a meeting with a resurrected saint or a noble queen.

There was another matter of importance: how enthusiastic should he look when meeting her and how should he conduct the conversation? Should he pretend that he had forgotten her and show that he only carried a pale memory of her? That would be the proper thing to do to hide their relationship. But how could he do it, given how intimate he had been with her for that long?

He thought about the matter until lunchtime. Then he was at a loss: should he wait in his room and order room service or gather his courage and head down to the dining room and take his chances? It seemed that his longing for her was beyond his resistance and will power. "Why not go down and meet her?" he asked himself. Fortunately for him, he had plenty of time to think the subject over and to calm his fears. Why, then, should he fear her? It could have been worse had he run into her in the lobby? All he needed to do was to get hold of himself and be prepared for whatever would happen, acting as naturally as possible. He ought to leave everything to fate to create its own network of circumstances in which people meet and part.

He got up, determined to go down to the dining room and sit at his usual small table, as if nothing had happened. But something inside him reminded him of the mirror. He stood in front of it grooming himself before leaving the room. He undid his tie then knotted it again and combed his hair. Standing in front of the mirror had not been one of

his daily routines. But he wasn't ashamed of it this time because that wasn't what preoccupied him at the moment. He was only thinking about her.

He finally walked down to the dining room and took his usual table, doing his best to remain calm and to avoid looking at people. But his eyes were, in spite of himself, secretly searching the tables and chairs for her and her husband. Strangely, there was no trace of them until lunch was over. He didn't eat of course, for anxiety quelled his appetite. He wondered, "Where are they? Did they order room service?" His only chance of finding them was to look in the lobby, terrace, or garden.

He went out, slowly looking in those places and amusing himself at the fact that he was the one chasing them instead of hiding from them. "This is the nature of the beast," he thought. Now that her ghost had disappeared, his heart was filled with courage to see her at least one more time. What he feared most was that they would slip away and never return before he would have the joy of finding them.

"Why despair?" he asked himself. "They must be resting in their room after lunch. They will be out in the afternoon. Everything must be left to chance, and I ought to go back to my normal routines: reading, writing, walking, and drinking tea on the terrace in the afternoon." He did exactly that.

On that day, he sat in his bamboo chair on the terrace and saw her husband walking in the garden with a military officer, a major, as the eagle and star on his shoulder indicated. No one was with or near them. "Where is his wife, then?" He asked. "Who knows? Maybe he left her in the room, or maybe she went out with one of her girlfriends. Of course, she can't be with her husband all the time. I will see her with him some other time. It's quite reasonable for acquaintances not to run into each other for two or three



days in a hotel as big as this, but they do eventually meet.” He could see the husband from where he was seated, but the husband was not aware of his presence as of yet. It crossed his mind to wait for her husband until the latter would turn around towards him, and then he would make himself available to him. He hoped that the husband would come over to him to renew their acquaintance and pave the way for a smooth encounter with his wife in the future.

He watched the husband talk to the officer in a low voice, but nothing was overheard. However, the husband’s hand gestures indicated a serious conversation and an attempt on his part to calm and convince his friend of something. It was his friend who attracted the attention of the Monk-Philosopher even more. Everything around him suggested an enraged person almost ready to break down. He shook, staggered, sighed and flared up, like a boiler about to explode.

This was all the Monk-Philosopher could infer from looking at the two men. They were almost the same age, about thirty-eight—or thirty-nine—years old. It was obvious they were bound by something that went beyond normal friendship. They spent some time talking and gesturing then turned around to go back to the hotel lobby. The Monk-Philosopher didn’t wait for them to see him on the terrace. He feared that the argument they were still engrossed in would cause them to ignore him. Anxious to show himself to the husband, he hurried to seize the opportunity. He pretended to walk out of the main door when they came in. But the husband, who saw him, greeted him briefly and without stopping or smiling or paying much attention.

The two men went into the hotel, leaving him astounded and unaware of what to do next. When he regained his senses, he couldn’t think of a way out except to proceed with

his old plan and leave the hotel. He walked the street aimlessly, thinking of what had just happened. He had expected a warmer greeting, more attention, and a few words from the husband to prepare for future encounters and to give the impression of the husband's desire to keep up their relationship. Though brief, the husband's greeting carried with it a sense of respect for the Monk-Philosopher. It was not warm enough to initiate a friendship, however. Could the problem be that the Monk-Philosopher was asking for too much and for things that never crossed the husband's mind? Why would this preoccupied husband be held accountable for what went through the mind of the man of letters? It seems that people either exaggerate or downplay the behavior of others based on their own feelings and perceptions, forgetting that a certain behavior often follows the logic of the circumstance.

That thought pleased him, and he returned accordingly to his room, promising to take things as they came in the future and to accept people as they were rather than as what he expected of them. He decided to let the circumstances work their own magic without his intervention. That won him a good night's sleep. The next day had been quiet until he walked out of the dining room and passed through the hotel lobby. For no sooner had he set foot in the lobby than he saw the husband sitting alone and, as usual, reading his book. The husband looked as though he was reading with one eye and searching with the other for someone he had expected.

The Monk-Philosopher controlled himself this time. He prepared himself for only a brief and courteous greeting. But, to his astonishment, the husband got up, gave him a warm welcome, and asked him to honor him with his company. The husband's eyes and tone of voice expressed sincerity, real desire, and inner joy—not that everyday courtesy.

The husband ventured, "I'm afraid I may be interfering with your schedule, after all you came to Helwan to relax or to write a new book in this peaceful place. I'm also afraid you don't remember me. It's true you returned my greeting yesterday and you're kind enough to join me now, but you probably don't remember who I am! We'd met a year ago."

The Monk-Philosopher smiled cordially, "I remember everything as if it happened yesterday. You were the one who honored me with his visit."

The husband bowed his head, as though he was escaping the ghost of a certain memory, then said in a low and vague voice, "Yes." But he soon became more conscious of himself, raised his head, and quickly asked, "How long have you been at this hotel?"

"Three days."

"Is that possible? I only saw you yesterday?"

The Monk-Philosopher did not answer that question but asked, "Have you and your family been here long?"

"I've been here for two weeks."

The Monk-Philosopher lowered his head so that the husband wouldn't see the changes in his face. He inferred from the husband's answer that his wife didn't come with him. Despair and relief possessed the Monk-Philosopher at the same time. On the one hand, he wished to see her and on the other he didn't mind postponing it until he was ready. The idea of meeting with her always awed him. He thought that at least for the time being he could breathe a sigh of relief and be content with hearing news about her until the two would meet again. He turned to the husband, hoping that he would say

something about her. But the husband seemed hesitant, as if he needed some encouragement. Silence reigned. Breaking it, the husband asked, “Do you like Helwan?”

“Yes, and you?”

The husband hesitated a little then said, “I’m not on vacation. I’m here for a private matter.”

“Are you here by yourself?”

“Yes, but my cousin, the officer you saw with me yesterday, has been here too for four days. He is going crazy because he hasn’t slept since he came here. I brought a doctor to see him last night. Nothing is worse than sleeplessness. It can drive one crazy or push one to commit suicide.”

The husband spoke in a tone of a person whose words sprung from a personal experience.

The Monk-Philosopher remembered his own sleepless nights and sided with the husband: “Yes, indeed.”

“I’m in a difficult situation I don’t believe anyone can endure,” the husband whispered.

The Monk-Philosopher wanted to direct the conversation to serve his own end, “Had your wife been here she would have helped you endure everything.”

The husband lowered his head and mumbled, “My wife?”

“I still remember your discussion with me about her and what you told me about her new passion for books and reading,” the Monk-Philosopher said in a tone he hoped would sound natural.

The husband raised his head and said in a muffled scream, "She writes now, Sir."

"Writes?" The Monk-Philosopher wondered with satisfaction.

"Yes, she writes confessions," the husband said in a tone of sorrow and grief.

"What?"

The husband straightened himself. His face changed, expressing a variety of meanings: determination, patience, entreaty, and sorrow.

"I have waited here for you this evening on purpose. After seeing you yesterday and knowing that you lodged here, it dawned on me to discuss a private matter with you. It's not easy for me to begin, but since the conversation led us to this point, I will tell you. This private matter may or may not interest you, but I still need your opinion as to what I should do. If you'll allow me to, I will tell you later about what I expect from you."

The Monk-Philosopher didn't seem to understand much of what the husband said. Realizing that, the husband said, "You'll know everything after you read her confessions. It makes no sense for me to recount her story to you when it's written down in her own hand, for I don't wish to overburden you or waste your time. If you read these pages tonight before you sleep, you will know all about my situation and will be able to discuss the matter in detail with me tomorrow morning. Do you object to that?"

The Monk-Philosopher shook his head approvingly, and the husband got up saying, "Allow me a moment to bring the Notebook from my room."

The husband left in a hurry, leaving the Monk-Philosopher in confusion: "What Notebook? What confessions? Who knows what she wrote? No, it can't be! Why not?"

The Monk-Philosopher thought that she filled the Notebook with secret letters to him, just like he wrote letters to her. They were communicating, then, without the one

knowing what the other did, he thought. Each one of them revealed to the other his or her love and compassion only on paper. They confessed their inner sentiments and wrapped them in the pages they wrote. His cries and night sighs weren't useless then. They managed to reach her heart and she responded accordingly. It is God's wonder that hearts can be attached in such a way. All these thoughts flowed through the Monk-Philosopher's mind. But he suddenly remembered what the husband was going through and wondered what he should say to him or do with him.

The Monk-Philosopher continued with his thoughts. That poor husband chose to let him know what's in the Notebook. There is no doubt that the wife had never meant the Notebook to fall into her husband's hands. The husband is sure to discuss the role played by him and described by the wife in the Notebook. What an awkward situation, the Monk-Philosopher thought, for it never crossed his mind to either hurt the husband or insult the wife. How could he defend himself against such accusations? And how could he afford to lose the regard and respect of the husband? Indeed this polite husband had never shown any signs of disregard or disrespect for him. But the Monk-Philosopher was worried about what was going through the husband's mind and what his inner self was investigating. It troubled him that the husband was able to hide his emotions with his usual courtesy and politeness.

"What is the correct way to deal with the situation?" the Monk-Philosopher asked. "Truthfulness, no doubt," he concluded. He planned on telling the truth to the husband. For the truth was pure and simple and he had nothing to be ashamed of as far as his conduct with the wife was concerned. His relationship with the wife didn't go beyond his pouring pure emotions onto paper. But he had no idea as to the extent of her writing in

the Notebook and the feelings she made known to her husband. He had no reason to doubt that they were lofty and noble. But he still wished to read them to prepare for his defense when confronted by the husband. With this idea in mind, the uneasiness he felt a while ago was dispelled, and he was left only with great happiness and a warm craving for her Notebook.

The husband came back carrying a red Notebook inside a folder. He gave it to the Monk-Philosopher saying, "I trust your integrity of course and know that you will appreciate that these pages contain a family secret that must not be disclosed. If you will read this Notebook tonight and return it to me in the morning, I will be thankful for your good deed. At any rate, I wish you a good night's sleep and I'll see you tomorrow."

The two men shook hands and each went his own way.

The Monk-Philosopher went straight to his room, holding the Notebook as if he were holding his heart.

**The Red Notebook**

I want to write! Yes, I must write down all I have. I'm drowning in waves of emotions that won't subside through mere confiding in one of my girlfriends. I must write my thoughts down, then, to relieve myself of stress, despair, joy, and hope—all are about to suffocate me. I have never known or understood the importance of writing down one's thoughts. But I cannot resist the urge today; I feel it all over me. I want to confess things—which may turn out strange and frightening—that have been on my mind. But why should I be frightened, since I will let no one read what I write?

Haven't I at least the right to whisper my feelings on these secret pages? I will be frank and precise in relating what happened. I will tell it as it is and will not defend myself or find excuses for my behavior. I don't need all of that. I don't intend to write a memoir or a chronically arranged diary, for the form does not matter. These pages are no more than my screams. Yes, I use them to scream out loud without anyone hearing me. They give me some of the freedom I ought to have to survive my living environment. Oh, what a martyr I am!

This evening, too, I have endured a new episode of persecution. My parents have asked my aunt to teach me a moral lesson. No, I cannot take it anymore. It's becoming impossible for me to correct a situation that is getting worse every passing day. It's clear to me now that if this encounter with my aunt were to occur two or three more times, I



would not hesitate to leave everything and run away or do something dangerous, for anything is permissible for a woman hurt in the manner I was today.

I feel chained up, like a dog. But a dog can at least bark. I can't cry, for no one would listen. I may as well cry and complain to the stars in heavens that I'm strangling in my golden prison whose guards surround me and fill me with horror and fear. My suppressed power shakes and I'm about to rebel. Yes, I will look for my idol elsewhere—not here where they arrange everything for me. Ever since I was young I have always dreamed to be free. Unfortunately, I was raised in a large family whose members agreed to annoy me to the largest extent. They examined my glances and scrutinized my inner self to see if I should act like this or that. They never got tired of watching and observing me. I don't want to give the impression that they were bad people. I only want to say that I don't agree with their way of thinking because it's completely different from mine. What a misery for all of us! What a catastrophe life has brought upon us that we can neither reject nor justify. I know I'm not the most rational person, but they too are nothing but a bunch of believers in clichés and silly virtues. Their definition of 'family' is really moving and good, but it's bothersome nonetheless.

Today the dispute with my aunt was over the wet nurse. I was told she is a woman of disgraceful conduct. My aunt, of course, went on citing proofs and lecturing me about wisdom and example. I listened to her tedious advice with my usual calm, never getting angry or even showing signs of it. My disgust was great that it kept me from answering her. I only told her—with a forced smile—that at present I don't see the wet nurse's behavior as endangering my daughter, who is not yet two years old.

I'm about to lose my mind in this psychological seclusion of mine, particularly with nothing to ease its hardship and impact. O life! I want to go where my fancy induces me and where my desire leads me. I want to circle in the air of adventure, not sit here like a bird with broken wings. Yes, I want to listen to a man, or men, telling me I'm beautiful. I'm eager to tremble under the touch of their playful hands and to listen to entreaties coming from their burning hearts. I may turn them down, or I may passionately surrender my heart and body to them then pull back! I will give up my body then change my mind. I want to know how to play the game of love. Yes, I, too, want to love and be loved. I want to be teased by a man who is crazy about me. I don't care what happens to me after that or whether I end up like a withered flower plucked off the front of a beautiful dress.

In my prison, I endure an ailment no one can diagnose or cure. I know that, with my silence and depression, I have become unbearable. Nothing, not even the funniest joke, can make me smile or pull me out of my nervous sadness. I'm only twenty-five, young and beautiful as they say. I live with a husband whose career is stable. Though I confess my views may be wrong sometimes, I trust that, for the good of everyone, it's better to leave me alone in my depression than to force me out of it. For if I have my back to the wall, I'm afraid I will lose my nerve and things may get out of hand!

I find it difficult to breathe in such an atmosphere with all these injustices done to me by these people. I think it's fair to claim that I have done the right thing by withdrawing from their harsh company and finding refuge in my bed. In my room, I prefer talking to myself to carrying a conversation with my spinster aunt. I know I'm twenty-five and still

young, but am I destined to waste the rest of my life in the likes of those miserable moments?

I have been married to a man of perfect morals for three years. His perfection and straightforwardness make him exemplary to younger generations. He allows me to socialize only with particular friends of his—those who share his ideas and values. My husband and I can't talk without the conversation breaking down for the most trivial reason. We would suddenly fall silent, noticing at once that we're about to fall away from one another and that our feet are about to carry us into two different directions.

Yes, we cannot discuss any subject without being conscious that we're husband and wife and without having all the restrictions that go with marriage. How unhappy this life is! Magnanimity and forgiveness are not to be found in our house. No one here appreciates a warm sentiment or forgives a slip of a tongue or overlooks foolishness. On the contrary, everything smells of honor, bashfulness, and chastity—which is the same as the smell of decay, antiquity, old fashions, and closed rooms. I, who had believed that marriage would save my life, ask myself now: which of the two lives is more depressing and ridiculous? Maybe the difference between them is that before marriage I had at least some hope and was not crippled by the burden of a husband.

I'm lonely. There must be passionate love—not that cold brotherly love—between a husband and his wife because without it life has no meaning. I had aspired to have a taste of happiness through that intimate relationship they call “marriage,” and to share the feelings of a slave girl adored by her lord—the husband. I had planned to admire my partner, the man fate made my husband. I had wished to see myself illuminated by the reflection of the rays of his power. I had dreamed and hoped to love him passionately

with all my heart—the kind of love that would get me to lose my mind. I had planned not to ask about the reason for my sincere dedication to him or the secret behind his magic that made me his grateful adorer.

Those golden and shining dreams I had constructed have boiled down to nothing more than a husband under whose guardianship they managed to put me. My husband is more serious than he should be. Living with him has turned me into the living dead. The majority of people still don't know what "love" is. They view strong emotions as harmful and dangerous and see no one worthy of woman's love except a husband to whom she is tied by circumstances. It matters little to them if the two are completely different in nature, temper, and inclination. They don't want to understand that there are numerous types of love and that a human being cannot live without profound love.

What a life . . . my domestic life, I mean . . . how delightful . . . really! After getting through with my makeup in the morning, what do I do? Nothing, except shop with some of my girlfriends or play tennis in our court, or in one of our acquaintances' courts, with my girlfriends of course. My husband no longer has time to play with me or with anyone else. Like all husbands after the first year of wedlock, he has become preoccupied only with his work. If I don't go out, I'm left to loiter gloomily in the house, moving from one room to the other until I end up near the radio. I then listen to the songs and find echoes of my grief in their sad tunes. Saddened, I turn to reading. I now realize why my husband has been asking me to read: he knew boredom awaited me. But only a few books can quench my thirst. I'm disappointed in books and in their authors.

When my husband returns from work, we eat dinner in silence then we go to our room. Sometimes I let him go alone and I sit in the living room to browse through some

magazines. In the evening, some of his relatives visit us. Among them a girl cousin of his—silly and naïve on the surface but cunning and wicked underneath. We all sit and talk nonsense and tell trivial and boring stories until it's time to eat. We continue with this silliness after eating or play cards until bedtime. Then we all go our different ways, each to his or her bed uttering the famous phrase, 'Good night.' We all sleep like a baby.

I exaggerate nothing. This is my life. When I decided to write my confessions, I promised myself to say nothing but the truth, be it bitter, disgraceful, or embarrassing.

I'm bored! I can't take it anymore. I torture myself trying to remember one happy moment in this endless chain of days. I need to breathe a little and to have a taste of life's charm. But how? And when? I cannot consult a fortuneteller about my future, for I'm afraid she will inform me that it's like my past.

But Heaven may have heard my sighs and decided to stand by me at last. Today my husband came home from work and told me that he was going away tomorrow on a business trip for a few weeks. For more than a year now, he has never left me for a single day. I was relieved when he related the news, but I hid my joy and put on an anxious and sad face instead. Then I asked him, as though madly in love, "You're leaving? Do you have to, Mohamed?"

"It's important. It's an urgent assignment in one of the provinces."

I expressed my unhappiness about the mere idea of his departure even for a single day, making sure to show signs of discomfort and pain.

Today is Tuesday. I will have lunch at my mother's, where members of the family get together for their weekly meeting. How boring! And what a demanding custom people must put up with. I have to choose my words carefully lest they be

misinterpreted. For this reason, I prefer absolute silence to being accused of madness and violating the rules of etiquette. I prefer criticism to taking part in their nonsensical, wrong, and backbiting gossip. How could I refute my aunt's accusations when she—backward and narrow-minded as she is—delivered bad judgment on the behavior of my girlfriend Mirvet, major Housni's wife? Housni is my husband's cousin and his dearest relative friend. My poor girlfriend's only crime was that she wanted to live her life as a civilized creature and to breathe a little. But my aunt and those like her in my family thought my friend no better than a whore. How repulsive the words I heard about her were that my ears were irritated. Besides my aunt, another relative didn't forget to add, 'The truth is that everything in this woman, including the perfume she wears, points out her levity, recklessness, and carelessness.'

All those present went about attacking her in the same fashion. They snapped at this unhappy woman with their words and made her the subject of their conversation. I've come to realize that it was useless to defend such a woman at such a banquet, for she was an important dish. They attacked her reputation with stronger appetite than they did the lamb chops, goose, or turkey.

I used to hide my displeasure with those who fed on other people's scandals. Even girls of the younger generation, whom I thought would think differently than their conservative elders, found the same pleasure in that dish of scandal and rumor. It never crossed their minds to put themselves in her place and to think about human weakness that may have played a major role. I was the only one who was sincerely able to forgive sins and faults on this earth, leaving matters of judgment only to God. People in my family, as in many others, would like everyone to believe they are zealous about morals.

They go around influencing people of lesser social status who, although don't share their views, cannot challenge them. I'm sure that in my absence they're delivering the same hideous judgement on me. But it doesn't matter. Say what they will, I still won't share their kind of food. I can't stomach it.

At four in the afternoon, my younger sister called to see what we would do later in the day. We agreed to meet at our cousin's home to play cards, then we would go in the evening to see the new movie, 'Bliss of Passion.' There was no escape from going to the movie because our older sister, who never took no for an answer, reserved a box for us at the theater. I like to go to the movies; some Egyptian films please me. At least they're better than family gatherings! I decided against wasting that afternoon at my cousin's listening to the remainder of the endless chain of gossip. What I'd heard at lunch at my mother's was enough. I preferred to go for tea at Mina House with my husband and my brother-in-law.

Had I known what fate had in store for me and the impact my visit to Mina House would leave on my life, I would never have gone there. Whenever I think about this incident I cannot help but cry. But my tears aren't the tears of regret, but those shed for a memory, which, without a doubt, is the most beautiful, magnificent, and unbelievable in my life.

At about five o'clock, we were on our way to Mina House. The weather was nice. We picked a table in the garden. The waiter came over, and my husband asked me what I would like then gave the orders to the waiter. We surveyed people around us. My eyes met with those of a young man sitting at a table in front of us. The way our eyes met shook me from inside. That young man's features were gorgeous and perfect, and his

body was erect. His elegance indicated a person of good taste and choice. I looked aside at once. But our eyes met again, more than once. During an hour or two, our eyes were meeting, avoiding, and unconsciously meeting again. I hopelessly tried to avoid looking, but something vague and deep inside me which I couldn't explain kept pulling me towards him. Although he was a mere stranger to me, I felt I was already under his influence. This is uncommon, for many a time we women run into men and our eyes meet theirs but leaves no effect on us. Other times, however, a woman may meet a particular man who she believes will never have a place in her heart or life. But, to her surprise, fate allows love to bind them with its chains. That woman would then ask, 'How did it happen and why?' But the only answer she would get is from her inner feelings bursting forth, 'This love has always been there.'

Seeing the young man didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was the timing or chance or fate that put me face to face with him. That handsome young man was no less than the leading actor in "Bliss of Passion," the movie we were going to see that night. I had seen him in other movies, heard my girlfriends gossip about him, and read about him in magazines. I admired him in the same fashion many women did. But from that afternoon on, I felt a particular bond with him.

We went to the movies, and I saw the young man on the screen like a dream came true. I listened to his warm, fluid voice and imagined it running through my joints and head and causing me to almost lose my mind. I began to ask myself questions: Is this man the same in the movies as in real life? Does he talk to the women he likes with the same sweetness and passion as he does to his co-star? Can he love in real life as he does on the screen? Does he always win the most beautiful and hard-to-get women in reality



as in the movies? Then I thought I would never throw myself into the bosom of that liberal master whom I doubted to see afterwards except on the screen. But I saw no harm in my mere reflections and self-conversing!

I thought to myself that if a man of these looks, stature, and influence took it upon himself to conquer a woman's heart, she would undoubtedly surrender, even if she was the most conservative. What would happen if a man like him stood before me and talked to me with that charming voice? What would I do if he used that dreamy and gentle yet firm and brutish tone of his to order me to follow him? There was no easy answer.

On that night I fell prey to conflicting emotions. I couldn't take my mind off that man. The image of him sat heavily on my imagination and his picture followed me constantly. I admired everything about him—his glances, voice, and gestures. I thought and wondered about the paradoxes of life as I watched the movie. How could they permit a rich and fat man with high blood pressure to play the role of lover and to sleep with a young and beautiful actress, knowing that it would offend people of taste and intelligence? Whereas they won't let a handsome young man like him to sleep with a nice and refined woman!

I longed to be in this man's arms at least once. How sinful of me! The mere thought of such a thing is a sin. But is it not true that confession of sin is worthy of some forgiveness? I was relieved of a heavy burden by bringing these thoughts out of my chest and lifting them off my shoulders and jotting them down on these pages. Nevertheless, I was still troubled.

I couldn't sleep that night. I couldn't stop walking around the room. My husband shouted at me at last, 'How strange! Why don't you sleep? Why do you circle the room

like that?’ Had I been able to tell him the truth, I would’ve said, ‘Why? If I had that young man in my bed, I would’ve been in it a long time ago.’

It beats me that men can adore and admire actresses and spend lavishly on them, but we women can’t. We should be free to show our compassion to actors and to surround them with our care and love. It has been said that virtue and morality withhold us from doing so. But I question any assertion which makes legitimate for men what it deprives us of and forgives them but not us—the weaker sex.

I woke up early this morning to pack the suitcase of my travelling husband, who was to leave before noon. When it was time for him to leave, we exchanged an amicable good-bye. Then he reminded me to do some errands for him while he was away.

There I was, overwhelmed by my sense of freedom. I hurried to go out. I left the house with the excuse of going to buy a few things. But I wandered aimlessly in the streets instead, giving my eyes a chance to look at people passing by me and to check different things in storefronts. A handsome man was at my heels whispering, ‘Absolutely gorgeous! I’m willing to be of service to you all my life.’

I hastened my steps and said, ‘And I’m unwilling to waste five minutes of my time on you.’

Such incidents and brief chats entertained my walk until noon. Then my feet carried me, in spite of myself, to the movie theater where I had seen the ‘Bliss of Passion’ the night before. I couldn’t resist my strong urge to go inside. My motive was stronger than my will. All I hoped for was to know something about that actor who preoccupied my mind to such an extent.

There I experienced the surprise of my life. This is the wonder novelists' fancy cannot account for. For no matter how rich their genius, novelists cannot create events like the ones in real life. They rarely represent reality in their books because it is sometimes more magical than they fancy it to be. If I'd read the events I'm writing about now in some novel, I would've shrugged my shoulders in disbelief and indifference.

What happened to me on that day was not a dream; it was the real thing. You can call it chance or fate or luck. No sooner had my feet crossed the threshold of the movie theater than I saw the actor standing by the box-office. A strong feeling restrained me. Was it his sudden presence that caused my confusion? I think so. Anyway, I got hold of myself so that I wouldn't give him the impression that I cared to see him. I quickly took some money out of my purse and bought a movie ticket, unaware whether it was for the morning or evening show. Then I got ready to leave as quickly as I could.

I don't know what to call that power which controls our actions in a manner so sudden and unexpected. Chance or fate, maybe? To my great surprise, I heard the sweet tone of the actor's voice calling politely on me, 'Excuse me, Madame. You dropped something.' I said to myself, 'How smart and clever this man is in forging honorable and appropriate excuses!' It was true that I dropped a piece of paper—the list of things my husband had asked me to get for him—when I was taking money out of my purse. The actor picked it up quickly and gave it to me. I looked up and found him looking sharply and strangely at me, with his shining eyes sparkling with lust. His look made my body quiver. When I stretched out my hand to take the paper, I felt his hand touching mine, as though touching a live wire. I felt as if I were intoxicated with a strange and delicious kind of wine that no power on earth could pull me away from of its influence. I

held firm nevertheless, thanked him, and prepared to leave. But he hurried to say, 'I'm happy, Madame, for having the chance to meet you today. I saw you the day before yesterday at the garden of Mina House. When I saw you coming now, I was taken over by an incomparable joy.'

The words he uttered sounded as if they were mine, for I felt the same way. But I absolutely couldn't tell him. I stood in front of him silent but happy. I couldn't describe my happiness when I listened to his plea in that warm and enchanting voice of his.

'I'm a shy woman and don't know what to say,' I said.

'No, Madame! It's true I don't know who you are or what you do, but what I would like myself to believe is that you would not find it difficult to think of me a little. Am I asking for too much?'

I began to laugh and said, "If it's quite all right for me to think of people whose only favor is to imprison me with boredom, can't I think a little of an artist who is able to touch me with his talent?"

'I don't like to see you concerned with the artist alone, Madame, for I have more to offer. Don't think of me only as an artist.'

'How do you want me to think of you, then?'

'Pardon me! I know you may pass bad judgment on me, for what I'm about to say is quite crazy. I can't ask you to believe a man you have just met, but I beseech you to trust my sincerity. When I saw you at Mina House, I took it to be a revelation. I had a strong feeling that we should have known each other a long time ago. I know I don't deserve the affection of a beautiful and, undoubtedly, beloved and pampered lady like yourself. I

hope however that you will look at me with indulgence and react positively to my request.’

At that moment I felt that our conversation was taking a dangerous turn, for I wasn’t familiar enough with this sort of bold flirtation. I couldn’t pass through such conversations without getting myself in trouble or hurting the feelings of others. But it dawned on me all of a sudden that he was not flirting or joking. He was serious, or at least he seemed so to me: his voice was sincere; his eyes spoke of desperate hope; his lips smiled with plea and supplication; his nostrils shook with awe and hope; and he offered himself as a sacrifice. All these things found an easy and smooth way to my heart.

Perhaps whoever runs across these pages will accuse me of recklessness and dissoluteness; but can we always explain things with good reason and sound logic? Any one who is critical of my actions will have to put herself in my shoes to understand the impact of his words on my heart. Only then can she draw a conclusion. I’m sure she will plunge in confusion before rendering a judgment.

Getting into my cab I said, ‘Thank you and goodbye!’

‘No, Madame, don’t say goodbye for we must see each other again in the evening. I will wait here during the evening show for you. Please come and have mercy on me. Be generous! I won’t ask you to give me a definite response now though, but I’ll free myself of all engagements and wait for you in the evening. Please don’t say anything now and leave me at least with the sweetness of hope.’

At that moment I realized that love had become my master and lord. No one could imagine the power of his words. They defeated, swept away, and controlled me. When the evening came, nothing was on my mind but him. I even forgot about the things my

husband had asked me to bring. I was ready to crush anything that stood in the way of fulfilling my desire, even if it were the entire human race. I felt like a slave maiden falling under a strange and controlling power. I had to take one of two courses: to forget him or to fall in his arms. I chose the latter. Why did I end up in such submission, passion, and sacrifice? And how could I agree to go through adventures I had never imagined? I could not answer.

I looked back at the entire affair and hopelessly tried to justify my actions. Two hours before, a blind love I couldn't resist or overcome got a hold of me. The mere mention of his name or the brief image of him in my mind was enough to drive me crazy. He has become the symbol of life's charm I have always hoped for and run after like a mirage. It wasn't easy to justify what I was going through. Sometimes I thought that I was possessed. I tried to feel ashamed and to scorn such love, but every time I pulled away from it I was violently pulled back. It seems that the heart has a hundred means to its end.

It has been said that life is a play. This is correct. Perhaps we would be more accurate if we thought of it as a movie fate made in its lab and assigned each one of us a specific role. Then Fate projected us as moving shadows on the screen of space and under the light of time.

Consequently, I believed fate prepared me for that course that I couldn't fight my urge to meet that fascinating man. But I was not comfortable with the idea of going to meet him during the crowded evening show. I was a bit apprehensive. But I thought I shouldn't think too far ahead for the bridle was no longer in my hand. I had to follow the orders of my heart and march into the unknown with both its charm and danger.

When love reveals itself to women, it descends on them clothed in the best of sensations and feelings, causing belief to germinate in their hearts. They believe they have a duty—a feminine duty, that is, to give happiness to those who know how to give it to them. This belief is what gave me strength and made me shout: ‘I’m in love! I’m in love! From now on, no reason, resolution, or logic will prevent me from reaching and achieving my goal. I will not hesitate to commit a sin if necessary to win this man.’

If what I’m writing now falls in the hands of those guardians of old traditions, they will be furious and will want to thrust their fingernails into my neck because they will never understand my sentiments. Yet their calm minds and reassured logic will fall silent when confronted with a woman howling, ‘I’m in love,’ like a hungry animal.

I had to conceal my absence from home from those who watched me at every turn. For even my servants spied on me. It wasn’t difficult to find a way, particularly for a woman like myself who was used to lying everyday.

I pretended to be sick with severe headache and went to bed early, after informing the servants that I wouldn’t have dinner and that they could go their different ways for the evening. They gladly hurried off. I must say, however, that later on, I didn’t bother to conceal my night outings to such an extent.

At about nine thirty, all lights were out and the house was completely silent.

I was free at last. How happy free people are! As a matter of precision, I underwent a lot of self-reflection to find whether those final moments had awakened my mind and alarmed my conscience. I found no evidence. Here, honesty demands my sincere confession that I don’t ever remember having second thoughts about or being ashamed of those upcoming hours that had a good chance of bringing disgrace to me. It just never

crossed my mind. What preoccupied me was more important: I wanted to amass all my faculties to look beautiful.

Had that man seen me in front of the mirror, he would have witnessed a strange but gorgeous scene. I stood there like an enraged cat, calm and furious, nervous and satisfied at the same time. I arranged myself with precision and strong desire to capture his mind.

I picked a tight-fitting black velvet dress so that it would show the charm and details of my body. It was simple, nonetheless. I discarded all types of jewelry: bracelet, ring and earrings. I wanted my face and body alone to claim credit for capturing this man's heart. Another look in the mirror strengthened my determination and self-confidence. I didn't forget to drink a glass of whiskey of the good brand my husband had carefully picked. It helped me gain that sort of firm will alcohol is known to impart to the mind. I took the receiver off the phone, so the phone wouldn't ring while I was away. Then, without any hesitation, I went out to see him.

At a quarter to eleven my cab pulled in front of the movie theater. I went inside. The feature film was playing. I asked the man at the door about the actor. He told me that he was inside.

'I want to see him,' I said.

'Who should I tell him?' the man at the door asked me.

I felt the blood rushing to my face. It was an embarrassing question, unfit for a lady in such a situation. It never crossed my mind that the man would ask me such a question. Justice and honesty compel me to say here that I tried at that moment to lecture myself in morality and to discourage myself from meeting with the actor.



But I couldn't do it. I wasn't conscious. I was like a straw in an ocean, tossed from one wave to the other. It seemed that it had been decided long ago for me to fling myself into the bosom of adventure. Nothing could stand in my way. I was ready to do anything to see him. Be it a scandal or tragedy, anything was acceptable except turning back and denying my passion. Turning back was the greatest sacrifice I could not accept for anything in the world. But my heartbeat was getting stronger and stronger.

I had to get out of that situation quickly, so I told the man, in a commanding but gentle tone, 'Tell him, a lady is asking to see him.'

The man couldn't resist my request. He disappeared for a while and came back followed by the actor. The actor approached me and took me quickly and gently by the hand to a vacant box inside the theater. He said to me in a voice flowing with the warmth of joy, 'What a joy, Madame. Here you are at last. I'm happy.' He sat me at the front of the box and took my hand and impressed a kiss on it. Fortunately it was dark, and the audience was busy with the movie. We began to whisper to each other as if in a dream.

'Aren't you surprised a little by my coming?'

'I was waiting for you. You ought to have come!'

'But you cannot imagine what it meant for me to do so or what the consequences would be for me.'

'I think I can imagine that and understand your situation. But trust me, Madame, we were meant to meet and know one another. Whatever we do, we cannot avoid the work of fate. I know that, and I told you so when I first saw you. I waited for you even though you never gave me a plain answer as to whether you would come. But I was sure you

would, because we share the same destiny. Have you any doubts that we were destined to fall in love with each other?’

My heart almost jumped out of my bosom when I heard him pronounce the word ‘love.’ It filled me with the utmost joy, which was about to lend itself to mysterious sorrow. Then I turned to look at the big screen I’d ignored thus far, for I had seen the movie the day before. Although I intended to give all my attention to him, an erotic scene on the big screen took my attention away. That sweetheart sitting beside me in the darkness and pouring his passion into my heart was hugging the leading actress in the movie. She moved across the screen revealing a slim body and bright, pretty face. She wore a gorgeous dress exposing her arms which embraced my sweetheart’s neck. I must confess jealousy began to bite into my heart. I watched the beautiful actress more carefully and listened to her romantic words to him and his to her. Then I began to wonder if their dialogue was real. After all, they were together during the making of the movie, and it ought not be difficult for an actress like her to capture his heart: women like her are the best trained and most specialized experts in this business. I wondered whether I could compete with a woman of such qualities.

I felt my ears buzzing and my throat dry because of this thought. I imagined myself awakened from a wonderful dream only to collide with the deception of reality. There it was—love being acted out on the screen. How would I know it wasn’t being acted next to me in the darkness as well? The actor was the same in both cases. So, which was real and which was fictional? Do you suppose he differentiated between the two? Did he recognize what differentiates the two? Love? Could he love me? My mind and consciousness failed to discern the truth in the darkness. All I knew was that I loved him

but I had no idea where our relationship would lead. And what a difference there was between his limelight life and my quiet and confined one. I thought I should prepare myself for great pains to come if our relationship was to become serious. I began to quiver at such an idea. Was it proper for me to fall in love with a man like this, ready to bewitch and confuse the hearts of women—learned and ignorant, experienced and naïve? Could I keep and tie a man like this to my side? Oh, here I'm talking about ties and shackles again, forgetting that I was the one who spent her time cursing the ones placed around her neck. But, regardless of anything, his shackle felt soft, and I was happy to be bonded to him forever.

I passed my hand over my forehead, thinking about the risk I was taking. It dawned on me for a moment that it would be wiser and better for me to escape and to go back quickly to my prison. Was it better to tell him I was feeling dizzy and then leave, or to continue with him in such a way, where the slightest of slip was enough to cast me into the abyss? I felt, in spite of myself, that I lost all my will. I was either sleepy or induced to sleep. The demon of aberration possessed me—body and soul. Am I not as weak, obedient, and vulnerable like other women?

I asked myself, 'What will happen if I change my mind and quit half-way?'

Nothing, except to go back to my cold room to bite my fingernails and regret my escape from the face of the unknown and from the masked danger that may hide a pretty smile behind the frightening knitting of eyebrows. What good would come out of my resistance? Wasn't I who had wished and hoped for everything that I was going through? I was at the threshold of either pleasure or pain. But didn't I say that I preferred torture to the void which engulfed my life?

But why do I speak of pain and disappointment? The naked truth was that he was sitting next to me, waiting. That was the only truth worth living for. This idea dispelled my hesitation and made my heart shine anew with the light of hope.

The movie was about to end and I was still absorbed in my thoughts. I felt his hand touching mine gently. He whispered in my ear, 'I think we better go now—if you like—before the lights are turned on.'

His idea suited me. I admired his tactfulness and acumen. I was undoubtedly afraid of being seen by any one who knew me, had we waited for the lights to be on. I got up at once and he took my hand and led me to the entrance of the theater.

'I'm all yours! Where would you like to go this evening?' he asked.

'I'm really . . .'

'You're the gift fate has given me. I cannot let go of you that easily! No, I will not approve of or listen to any of your excuses.'

He looked at his expensive watch and said, 'It's ten minutes to midnight. You must be hungry by now. I have some food at my house. I hope you'll like it.'

Before hearing what I had to say, he signaled to one of the men standing by the door to call a cab. Luckily there was one near the entrance. He helped me get into it then he got in and sat next to me and ordered the driver to head for Zamalek.<sup>8</sup> The car moved along in that quiet night.

He whispered in my ear, 'I'm not in a hurry to know your name, but you'll undoubtedly allow me to call you my friend.'

'Of course, you're my friend.'

‘Well, since you’re my friend I doubt you’ll deny me a kiss!’

He embraced me gently and carefully, as though embracing a sacred thing. He put his lips on mine, lightly and nicely. It felt like a pure engagement kiss.

The car finally stopped in front of a splendid building. He got out and helped me do the same. Then he placed a banknote in the driver’s hand and put his arm in mine, leading me to his place. It was a nice and tidy apartment. I glanced at a table in one of the corners and saw plates of cold meat and dessert and a bottle of whiskey. He helped me take my coat off, while stamping my hand, arm, and neck with his kisses which felt like a breeze.

He cleverly avoided any overt contact between our two bodies. Like a wine taster, he wanted to sip his glass slowly. He said to me with a meek smile, ‘Make yourself comfortable!’ Then he put his arm around my waist, and I made a quasi-pillow of his shoulder for my head. He led me to the bedroom where he whispered the word ‘sweetheart’ while we sat on a soft sofa.

We embraced, our lips melted into each other, and our eyes met one another. Our breath was mixed that I thought I inhaled his breath deep into my heart. I realized then that my body had been yearning for love and that that man could make anything of me. I felt his smooth fingers unbutton my dress and strip me slowly and patiently. We began to exchange words of admiration. Then he took to teasing me with his hand and to kissing me. His kiss was similar to my husband’s but with one difference: my husband kissed a lifeless body, eager to escape and bored with his artificial and unbearable foreplay.

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<sup>8</sup> A prestigious neighborhood about two miles from downtown Cairo. It was predominantly British neighborhood between the Wars. Al-Hakim may be hinting here that movie stars used to frequent that neighborhood to socialize with the British.

But with this man there was nothing I disliked. I, too, yearned to cover his body with my kisses. He finally carried me, almost unconscious, to his scented bed, deposited me there and disappeared for a while. He came back wearing a satin robe, which he left on while flinging his body next to me. He resumed teasing and playing with me. Then he began to lull me with his romantic words, 'My sweetheart . . . My idol . . . My life . . . ' until our two bodies became one, not a hair separating them.

Only today do I realize why women eliminate all obstacles that prevent them from getting to the man who will make obvious to their blind eyes the pleasures of love. I wonder how I had missed out on that great pleasure: surrendering myself to my lover and melting in him. How had I missed out on the greatest of feelings: giving in to the lover and melting into him? The feeling that I'm nothing but a weak and fragile thing in his hands waiting for him to arouse the best of feelings in me. How happy women are when they submit to such men and when they fold their will under men's wings.

I felt with him so much like a new woman that I sometimes thought I had been a virgin before he came into my life. I must confess: there are some men who give us nothing but pain and violence when they have contact with us, filling us only with discontent. They are selfish and careless about the disgust we feel by their plain slighting of us. They have never cared to cover their mechanical sex with a little bit of gentle play or flattery. It is uncommon for a woman to change her initial feelings of disgust and contempt about a man, unless he is capable of learning how to become sensitive to her.

With him, nothing shocked me at all. His civility immersed me in an atmosphere saturated with dreamy pleasure and shielded me from being conscious about what he was doing to me. We made love while we were intoxicated with sweet words and kisses.

And what was his reaction afterwards? He was grateful to me. His arm held me to his bosom like one holding on to his possession. As for me, I let my body take refuge in his and let him do as he pleased. The mere thought of separation from him filled me with sadness. For I wished to stay in his arms forever.

We stayed like that until dawn. Our night had been nothing but a long embrace. It made me realize that I was a woman, capable of enjoyment like many others. This man uncovered the unknown in me and reintroduced me to myself. I was intoxicated with the sweet whispers of the love he chanted all night. They relaxed my limbs and made me fall asleep in his arms, slowly and slowly. How long did I sleep? An hour maybe? or more or less? I don't know. All I knew was that when I woke up I found him leaning on his elbow and tilting his head on mine. I smiled when I glimpsed him looking at me. He said softly, 'I was watching you sleep. I thought your charming perfume intoxicated me. I suppose you're good at selecting it. I had to hold my breath lest I woke you. You were smiling in your sleep like you were dreaming, and your face was as innocent as that of a child.' At that point I asked him for a mirror to check myself. He still looked at my naked body with lust, but I wasn't embarrassed enough to cover it. In fact I was happy, for the mirror filled me with confidence and reassured me about my beauty.

The crimson color I had on my lips the night before turned rose, and my eyeliner dissolved into rings around my eyelashes, as if they were drawn by the relaxed fingers of fatigue. My hair was in disorder and tufts were scattered over my hot face. I looked strange in the mirror, but I thought of my reflection as a framed picture of pleasure. He was almost thunderstruck to see me like that. He snatched me in his arms, like an eagle snatching a pigeon, and embraced me strongly and violently. I was filled with pride like

never before. We began to look at each other with fear and confusion, as if it were our last time together. The sunlight came through the window's curtain and scattered its golden marks on the floor carpet. The light reflected on the silver caps of the makeup bottles placed on the table and on the face of the clock. It was six o'clock, time for me to leave. I got up at once and he did too. He left the room while I put my clothes on and went to an adjacent room to do the same.

We left the apartment in a hurry and took a cab, exposing our warm faces to the morning breeze. It was a beautiful morning. We felt the clarity of the sky as did the birds on the trees. They expressed their happiness with songs, something we couldn't do ourselves. He took me home and left, after we had agreed to meet again in the evening.

I stepped into my house. How gloomy! I had a sudden feeling that I was stepping into a prison, where I would be lonely and unhappy. After the charm of that night, it was impossible for me to resume my frightening life, especially with deceit being added to its misery.

What a night! I will never forget it as long as I live. When I related my adventure to my girlfriend, Mirvet, she opened her mouth in astonishment. The look on her face made me laugh.

'How can you surrender to a man on the first night?' she wondered.

It didn't take long to convince her. I smiled and said, 'Because I'm not an old-fashioned woman who always gives the man the illusion that she resists him until she is forced against her will. Why should I be like that? Must we women continue to play the role of those who are always deprived of their will? No, my dear, this is uncharacteristic of women in our time. A woman must let the man know that she is his equal and that she



has a say in the matter. She can give up her body whenever she wants—on the first or last night, it doesn't matter.'

I experienced many pleasurable nights with him, similar to the first one. I know people may accuse me of madness. But how sweet madness is if it means opening its arms and receiving me into its bosom, where I feel I'm in a safe nest and where my heart beats with love and admiration.

We had dreams and hopes every day. This evening he said, as I was in his arms, 'What do you say to us running away with our love?'

'What about my home and family?'

'Leave everything behind and come with me to Palestine, where we can protect our happiness under the shadows of the orange trees.'

Alas! propositions like this were nothing but illusion. Had it been for my heart alone I wouldn't have hesitated to follow him to the end of the world. But when I reflected on the matter later for quite sometime, I realized that in spite of my husband's indifference towards me and the lack of emotional excitement I felt when he touched me, he had never done me any harm. Even now, he still cherishes and loves me.

Suddenly I began to discern the ghost of my frightening and hideous action, and the painful consequences I would have gone through had I chosen to follow my desire and run away from my home and sever my marital relation in such a fashion. At that moment, some remnants of conscience and fidelity awakened in me. I refused, under any circumstances, to make my husband and child victims of my weakness, errors, and emotions—all of which proved to be stronger than my will. My fear of ruining my daughter stopped me and paralyzed my will.

There was another thing I thought about: what kind of future awaited me going to a man without a penny in my pocket? And how could a woman without a fortune like me—particularly if I was to be separated from my family and too proud to ask my mother for money—burden this actor with my food, clothes, makeup, and extravagance? My pride couldn't permit such a thing to happen. But even if my weakness and love for him overcame my pride, could he afford to bear this burden for long? No. I decided to never let myself be misled by love to such an extent. For a love relationship doesn't necessarily have to end up with the lovers running away together. In addition, it probably never crossed his mind to destroy my marital nest and to have me running with him after I sever my sacred bond with my husband. He certainly is aware of the consequences of such an action.

Besides, the mere idea of running away with him was enough to extinguish his fiery passion for me. Undoubtedly what he meant when he uttered his proposal—and when we were both intoxicated with passion—was for me to find a way or come up with an excuse to leave home and go with him for a few weeks to Palestine or elsewhere—behind my husband's and family's backs.

I find this impossible, no matter how tricky I am. Suffice then the amount of time we spend together for the time being, or else we'll face a disaster none of us wishes to see.

### **The Unworthy Idol**

The shock the Monk-Philosopher suffered after reading the pages of the Red Notebook was difficult to describe but not to imagine. Not only had the sacredness of his love for her been stained but also everything dear to him had suddenly tumbled down in the dust and become contaminated.

How strange, he thought. How did this woman turn out to be like that? And how foolish he was building her such a towering statue of nobility and chastity in his mind. Realizing that the affair was greater than he could handle, he began to view it with mockery and sarcasm. He knew exactly what he had gotten himself into.

What a fool, he thought of himself. He was like those who made gods to worship out of clay and mud. He recalled his letters to her spirit and the way he characterized and imagined her to be. He had no doubt now that every line he wrote to her was nothing but an extended laugh echoing his foolishness and ignorance.

Alas! the sentiment he poured for her on paper was useless, and his lofty worship of her turned out to be like an embarrassing and insulting trick of a clown.

On that cursed night, he sat up straight until morning, unconscious of himself or of anything around him. He didn't know what to make of his bleeding heart and exhausted mind. Sometimes he would be in pain like one who just had his tooth extracted. Other

times he emitted a kind of laughter which could be confused for weeping. He went through all of that on that night—nothing imaginary.

Many a time he deluded himself and said: “What have I to do with this woman and why should I care about her behavior, passion, or her lowness? Am I her husband?” That was the voice of reason in him. But the sound of his heart was getting louder in the dead silence: “She was more than a wife to you! You spent time with her and lived for her with your intellect, emotions, imagination, readings, and observations. She was someone there for you to lean on, to help and encourage you, and to give you strength. She was a kind of faith to you.”

Indeed she was all of that. For if she wasn't, he wouldn't have felt that frightening void on that night. Her loss proved disastrous for him because he had held her in high regard. He couldn't control himself; his tears came down. Watching them run down his cheeks in the room's mirror, he was ashamed, for he never cried, not even in his early youth.

When he thought about the woman and what he had read about her dissoluteness, he could only laugh at the whole affair. But his laughs and tears were mixed together in a single whoop, making it difficult to distinguish them.

He thought about many things during that ordeal except one: the husband who gave him the Notebook in the first place. His own ordeal made him forget about that of the husband. He remembered the husband only when he remembered that he had promised to return the Notebook to him.

He began to reflect on the husband and to ask questions: Why did the husband give him the Notebook? What did he want to discuss with him? What sort of discussion

would they have and how should he answer the husband? Besides, Why did that miserable husband look so calm? He decided that, regardless of anything, there was no escape from meeting with him for their meeting would offer the two relief and consolation. Both of them were victims, and both of them were hurt. The Monk-Philosopher felt too much compassion and mercy for the husband. He felt that they were brought closer by the same circumstance. They were both in it, facing the same opponent who deprived them of their happiness.

The Monk-Philosopher got dressed in a hurry. He didn't feel like having breakfast, except for a sip of tea. He went out of his room, carrying the Notebook which had suddenly and violently awakened him from his most beautiful dream.

Concealing his emotions, he descended to the lobby where he found the husband waiting with a book in hand. He greeted the husband and sat next to him in silence then gave him the shameful pages, not knowing what to say. The husband asked, in a bitter whisper as he took the Notebook, "Did you read it?"

"Yes," the Monk-Philosopher replied, his head bowed.

The husband was silent for a moment then said politely, "I'm sorry for making you read such pages, but I think you now realize what I'm going through and will forgive my asking too much of you. The husband of the lady you read about must need the help of a man of your character and intelligence."

"Trust me, I'm at your service. I hope I can be of use in whatever you direct me to do."

The husband made himself comfortable in his seat and said, "I better tell you the whole story right from the beginning so you would understand its complexity. You

probably don't know my full name until now. My name is . . . I'm from a reputed family, as you may have noticed, and so is my wife's. I think it's proper now to think of my family as middle class. When I was little I went to an English school then to a public school until I earned my diploma. My family sent me to complete my studies in England. I spent six years there, after which time I returned to Egypt and took a job. Then my parents, of course, thought to look for a wife for me, but I was among the believers that marriage is a blessing we don't deserve until we establish ourselves. It is the crowning of the youth's hard work and must come after the earlier struggle for a niche on the ladder of success has been endured. It must proceed after job and future security have been realized. This will make it easy on the wife, particularly during the first stage of marriage. The new family will then be founded on security, not on anxiety, and the windows of its house will open on a cheerful horizon, not on a wasteland.

“This was why I didn't get married until I was about thirty-five. My parents chose my current wife from a highbred family whose members my family had known for a long time. We saw each other during our engagement, then we got married. Since then I had never felt that we held anything for each other except mutual love and friendliness. She has never done me any wrong except her carelessness about books and reading, something I have always considered sacred and necessary in life.

“Perhaps my long stay in England made me pick up the reading habit. There, I used to live in one of the suburbs around London and had to take the train twice a day to my university and back to my home. I noticed that everybody on the train had a book in hand. The English also enjoy reading and discussing different matters by the fireplace. I have always longed to exchange ideas with my wife about what we read and watch, as a

way of filling our marital life with the best life has to offer. Alas! she was like many other women who seem cultivated on the surface but only care about trivial things inside. I jokingly called her the “fickle girl” but tried to change her for the better and to make the woman I wanted out of her. I began with what comes naturally to a person of her type: sports. I taught her how to play tennis, and she became good at it in a short time. I must say in fairness to her that she is wonderfully smart and has a strong will. She listened to my wishes and paid more attention to reading books, including your own as I’d told you when I first visited you.”

Observing the Monk-Philosopher looking down and distracted, the husband fell silent for a moment. The Monk-Philosopher was thinking about the wife’s visits to him—about which her husband knew nothing. He weighed his options: should he tell the husband or should he remain silent? He preferred the latter, for silence is golden, especially in his situation. It was because he didn’t want to open any door through which new doubts could come to hover around him or her.

He raised his head, ready to listen. The husband proceeded, “She read your books, Sir, as well as others. I’m sure that you, like me, regret the outcome. It never dawned on you or me that the only benefit she could get from her readings was that style with which she wrote these confessions. But neither you nor the books she had read are to blame, for every noble object can be an instrument of sublimity and absurdity at the same time. It sometimes depends on the person who handles it, not the object itself. A dirty hand will stain a clean object and a clean one will purge the dirty.

“I can assure you that I have never heard any bad thing about my wife and that it shocked me to read in her Notebook that her family used to lecture her on morality and to

curb her freedom that she had less freedom than a dog. All I know is that her family has both the conservative and the liberal, and that what modern young women—like herself—perceive as freedom is considered a scandal by their mothers and aunts. Many girls behave strangely in society today. They stay out late in nightclubs and on the beach, dress to extravagance, and flirt with boys on the streets and on the phone. But normally everything stops right there. When a girl of this type gets married, very often she changes her behavior and tends to respect and protect the institution of marriage. I wonder whether my wife was of this type, and whether her family knew and kept tabs on her because of it? Or maybe she was even wilder than that. I don't know. How can you expect a husband who respects his wife like myself to try to unearth things of this kind? My knowledge about her is what I have been able to learn through our three years of marriage. I haven't noticed any sign of disinclination on her part towards me at all. How did she succeed in hiding it from me? And why didn't she talk openly to me?

“We were a happy couple during the first year of our marriage, and I suppose she never denied that. I think she said in her confessions that she began to experience boredom with marriage after the first year. But she had a beautiful daughter by then, and I thought that their joy, play, and outings together would overshadow her romantic attachment to me. She wrote about how much I changed after the first year of marriage and accused me of getting her hooked on reading because I knew beforehand that boredom awaited her in our marriage. I think this has been a classical example of misunderstanding in every marriage since the idea of marriage and family came to be known on earth. No woman, ancient or contemporary, has abstained from telling her husband, ‘You’ve changed! You used to love me more than you do now.’ The truth is



that husbands don't change; only the form—not the content—of their love does: like a new building changing color and becoming majestic with the passing of time but without losing a single block.

“Marital love changes form just like our appreciation for a new work of art does. Have you ever noticed how enthusiastic people get when one of your books comes out? But after a certain time, their enthusiasm subsides and takes on a different form of deep and calm appreciation, which gives the book its eternal and classical status. Why do you suppose couples celebrate their anniversaries? Aren't their celebrations a form of appreciation for that marital love which stood the test of time? Unfortunately, a woman tends to forget, or pretends to have forgotten, all that. And if she remembers, she is always unconvinced because she values a few moments of a passing romance over everlasting love. Because she is used to being attracted to everything that shines in her eyes and bewitches her mind, a woman has no appreciation for that kind of everlasting and precious love. She would pay with gold to possess a bracelet of glass or a piece of pottery simply because she was dazzled by them.

“There wasn't any change or indifference, then, on my part towards her. On the contrary, after our child was born, she seemed to understand that our love was becoming loftier than our earlier playfulness, which we needed during the first stage of our marriage to affirm and strengthen our love. But after that initial stage, love becomes strong in and out of itself, and any wife can feel it in her husband's words, signs, gestures, or in his worried look when he sees her pale-faced or coming down with even a slight cold.

“I doubt that many husbands treat their wives as nicely as I have treated mine. I treated her like a lady in one of British aristocracies. I never interfered in her private life or even opened a letter addressed to her name. I never asked where she’d been, where she was going, or who her girlfriends were. I always kept her company, not to keep tabs on her, for it never crossed my mind, but to be with her and not make her think that I had a separate life from hers. I was a man who understood marriage as a partnership and paid all my dues to it. I didn’t even want to spend time apart from her with my friends, and I made every effort to get her to take part in their reception and conversations.

“It never dawned on me that my wife would write someday that she was weary of me and my friends or that she was bothered by my presence with her (to the extent that she breathed a sigh of relief only when I told her I was going away on business for a while). That really was beyond my mind, for what I saw as good conduct and devotion on my part was the subject of her complaint and the reason for my sin. If I had erred, it was undoubtedly unintentional. But if my life with her was such a series of errors, she should at least have gotten my attention.

“I did everything I could so that she wouldn’t fall into the boredom she is talking about now. Nothing pleased me more than listening to her recommending an outing or an evening gathering of which I willingly approved. We went out to parties of all sorts—private, public, and charity—as long as they were interesting, enjoyable, and entertaining. I took her to the best of nightclubs, movie theaters, and horse races. We went to Luxor and Aswan<sup>9</sup> during the winter of the first year of our marriage. As for the summers, she

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<sup>9</sup> Two cities about 180 miles south of Cairo known for their ancient history and warm climate during winter.

had to choose between Europe, Alexandria, or our country estate. We spent a summer in each.

“I don’t know what else I could have done to cure her boredom, unless she understood the word ‘boredom’ differently. Overcoming boredom meant adventure for her, as she clearly expressed in her Notebook when she spoke about her ‘desire for adventure.’ I think you and I are of the opinion that marriage and adventure do not mix, unless you think I’m a backward husband, ignorant of the progress of modernization marriage in our country has gone through, and disregard my continuous touch with the latest in Europe. If the wife in our country thinks that ‘adventure’ is unavoidable and necessary to rid herself of the unbearable boredom and cold emotions associated with marriage, then I will not render judgment on her myself. I will leave judgment to people like yourself and to society to judge her. I can tell you, however, that I have always understood the institution of marriage as most people have, or at least as I was led to believe they have. Trust me! I swear by my honor—if I can still use such a word after I have been deprived of it—that I was a good husband. I can see it in your eyes that you believe me.”

The husband lowered his head, as though penetrating and unearthing the past in search of dear memories. That touched the Monk-Philosopher who couldn’t find the proper words to express his feelings and who preferred silence to chancing a word that could hurt those of the husband.

After a while, the husband raised his head and resumed talking: “Our life went in the manner I have described and I, as I have already told you, was unaware of my wife’s hidden desires. All I knew was that I was living a happy marital life with a contented and

satisfied wife and a daughter about whose upbringing my wife cared so much. Two weeks ago, I stayed home one afternoon to write an urgent report for my work. I said ‘goodbye’ to my wife who was about to leave the house while my face was plunged in the files before me. She mentioned something in a hurry the gist of which was that she was going to visit a female friend of hers. I didn’t care much of course because that was usual. I didn’t even raise my head to look at what she put on. I was busy. But I remember how her exciting perfume filled my nostrils. But that too wasn’t unusual, for it pleased me to see my wife dress neatly and lavishly.

“She rushed out of the door, and I remained absorbed in my files. About half an hour later, our new servant, whom we brought from the province to help the other servants clean the house, came into my room holding this Notebook inside a government folder I had brought from work. She placed it next to my files thinking it was mine. I almost shoved it with its folder into one of my files, thinking it was something I’d dropped. But when I noticed its red color, I opened it and recognized the handwriting: it was my wife’s. Then I thought, ‘What does my wife’s writing have to do with my official files?’ I pulled out the Notebook as I was asking the servant: ‘Where did you find this?’ She said that she found it on the floor of her Mistress’s room by the dresser when she went to clean the room—as directed by the senior servant, who was busy with the babysitter at the garden. I gestured to her to get back to work and carelessly placed the Notebook on the desk, for never in my wildest dreams had I thought the Notebook would contain what it does. I resumed my work and forgot about the whole affair, except that the Notebook was accidentally brought to me by the servant and I was to give it back to my wife upon

her return. But then I thought it would be even better to call on the servant at once and order her to take the Notebook back to my wife's room.

“I stopped working, raised my head, and reached for the Notebook while I was about to call on the servant. But something crossed my mind: what subject would entice my wife to write all these pages? My fingers flipped some of the pages, in spite of myself, and my eyes passed by words and sentences that made my hair stand on end. I began to read from the beginning. My body was soaked in sweat, and my shaky fingers couldn't turn the pages. The more I read the more I felt darkness in my eyes and dizziness in my head. But I held on and forced myself to finish the Notebook before I would fall down on the floor. I hurried to read on while gasping for breath until I read everything.

“It's absolutely impossible for me to describe what I felt then. It's one of those things that can be felt but not described. The shock made me lose consciousness temporarily. It made me abandon the world of words for the world of sensation. For although I forgot everything around me in a single moment, I remember experiencing a strong faint spell, stomachache, and nausea. But I held myself with whatever strength was left in me, so people around me would not notice what I was going through. I stretched my legs and flung my head backwards and remained like that, thinking of nothing except the retrieval of my strength. My sweat stopped running down my body and I slowly began to see the light. My faint spell dissipated and my breathing was back to normal. I sat up in my chair exhausted and wiped my face with the sleeve of my pajamas.

“My physical pain subsided, and I regained consciousness. The first thing that came to my mind wasn't sorrow, grief, pain or anger, for we experience these feelings much later when we deal with catastrophes. When a dear one suddenly passes away, we first

become preoccupied not with weeping but with his burial. Weeping comes later; it has to do with the memory of a situation not with the way we deal with it. This is why I didn't think of anything then except one thing: how would I deal with her? It is absurd to subject one's mind alone to such a question in such circumstances because there are many other elements at play such as personality, upbringing, and intellectual background. As a matter of precision, I must tell you that I neither had the time nor was it appropriate for me to think or to reason. I was possessed with a single feeling: a mixture of awe, disgust, and hatred for the mere thought of seeing her when she came back. I couldn't imagine seeing that happen. If I had to choose between looking at her or at death incarnate, I would have picked the latter. I cannot describe to you my uneasiness at the thought of looking at her face—that beautiful face I had never gotten weary of looking at.

“I fixed my mind on that question alone: How could I lay my eyes on her again? She was to come back home that evening, that was a sure thing. She was to greet me as usual for she was unaware of what I knew. I didn't know what to say or do. Everything was imaginable in this world except seeing her face to face.

“I jumped to my feet, seeing no alternative except to escape. I wanted to get out of her way first and think later. It was unimaginable for me to stay under the same roof with her. I rushed to my room, put my clothes on, and packed my suitcase with her Notebook in it along with everything I needed for a long absence from home. My eyes toured the room, in spite of myself, passing by its furniture and reminding me of the happy days we had spent together. Everything in that room screamed with infidelity: the bed she described in her Notebook and the carpet she walked on back and forth on the day she

first saw her friend. I had no idea then about her anxiety and sleeplessness, but I have an answer to all questions now.

“I now understood why she’d moved to a separate room. She’d first told me that she was afraid of waking me up every time she got up to care for our daughter, who slept with the babysitter in a separate room. She’d said it was a good idea for each of us to have his separate room. I believed her and let her know how grateful I was for her effort to ensure my comfort and my little daughter’s. But when did she come up with this suggestion? Was it not after my return from my cursed trip, during which she committed her sin? And why did she want to sleep by herself? Was it not that she could be free to write her confessions? Who knows? Maybe she planned it that she could sneak out and come back behind everyone’s back. Who knows where she went on the day I discovered the Notebook with that eagerness and swiftness of hers which, undoubtedly, made her forget to hide it? Perhaps she meant to put it in her jewelry closet and lock it with that key she never parted with. But fate made it fall to the floor, without her knowledge, while she was taking out a piece of jewelry to ornament her dissolute beauty.

“All these thoughts passed through my mind like lightning as I stood before the suitcase in my room. I knew at once that my departure was eminent. For if all inanimate things in my house screamed at me and reminded me of her infidelity, what about people and what about her, with all the looks in her eyes which she could not mask with lying anymore?

“I walked out of the room and called on one of the servants to take the suitcase and put it in the cab I had ordered. I didn’t tell anybody where I was going, for I didn’t know myself what to tell the driver when he asked me until it dawned on me to lodge at this

hotel in Helwan, where I used to lodge before I got married whenever I desired to be by myself or to relax. But this time I came here exhausted and couldn't sleep on my first night or the few nights that followed. I read and reread her confessions. They are horrible! Marital infidelity is indeed a horrible thing. What makes it particularly worse is that she describes its details not with the tone of a person repenting after sin but with that of a confident and defiant person who believes it to be her natural right. By God, is this my partner and the mother of my daughter whom I'd loved dearly and spoiled all those years?

"I spent most of the first week here in torture I will spare you its details which may not interest you. But even if you ask me to describe my torture, I cannot tell you much except that I almost went crazy. Because of the lack of sleep, the continuous and exhausting thinking of a single subject day and night, and my furious and worn out nerves, I was about to come down with a dangerous nervous breakdown. It was impossible for my eyes to see anything except what my mind played of the adulterous scenes she described in her Notebook. My head was turned into a movie box with only these adulterous pictures projected on my mind. Sometimes I hit my head violently with my fist attempting to destroy that awful box. I was about to throw myself out of the window one night to rid myself of these pictures.

"I have understood ever since what drives us often to commit suicide. It's not the pain; it is the idea. Nothing is more dangerous than being persecuted by a thought. Facts and reality present us with no danger; images and ghosts do. They drive us to commit suicide.



“At that moment I remembered my daughter. She was the one who saved me, for she made me quit thinking about everything else and concentrate on her. I’d almost forgotten her. But when I began thinking about her, all the frightening pictures in my head began to gradually disappear. I felt some relief. My daughter saved me and pulled me out of my pain. Perhaps she saved me so I can save her. It is my sacred duty to rescue her from the bosom of such a mother.

“At that moment, my thoughts took a different turn: I no longer cared about the wife that, although my shock was great, I never thought to avenge myself or inflict any punishment on her or on her partner in that sin. I didn’t care even to know or find out about his name. Maybe it had something to do with my personality and the way I was raised up, as I’ve already related to you.

“When I was initially confronted with the situation, I thought of nothing but to hasten myself away from that filth. My shock was so great that it made me think of myself only—nothing and nobody else. I left by myself. But had I been aware I would have taken my daughter with me. But I thank God now that I didn’t hasten to commit such foolishness for I am in my second week and, having calmed and slept a little, I can better manage my affairs.

“When I first got hurt, I dressed my wounds with the best sterilizer. Do you know what it was? The best of books! You’ve probably noticed that I always have a book in my hand, because when I plunge myself in a serious reading I cleanse my soul at the same time.

“Anyway, when the tempest in my head abated, I began to evaluate the whole situation. I saw that the best course of action for me to take was to keep what happened

secret from other people and to negotiate secretly with my wife for a divorce. My wife would give up custody of our child, and I would begin to raise her according to my moral code and in the manner I desired.

“Reason dictates that raising the child under my moral code will be at least safer and more honorable for her than being raised under her mother’s. If the mother cares about the future of her daughter, she must be very careful not to let society know about her scandal and must think of an honorable reason to justify her divorce. It shouldn’t be difficult for her to find a reason. For divorce, like love adventures, is the trend of the day. Whatever reason she will come up with, it must not stain her daughter’s reputation in the future, because if people know the truth now they will repeat the proverb, ‘a daughter is to her mother’ and ruin the young girl’s reputation.

“One problem remains unsolved: who will negotiate with my wife? It is impossible for me to see or talk to her again. The mere idea of doing so makes my hair stand on end and threatens to collapse me. I thought about a dependable and honorable man who can keep a secret to negotiate on my behalf. I picked my cousin, the officer you saw with me. We were raised together when young. Our relationship has been based on friendliness and fidelity since day one. Among all my relatives, he has been the most loyal and compassionate friend. Although each of us has his own interests and inclinations, we share the same essence. Since his boyhood, he has preferred military life over intellectual, horses over books, and shooting over reading. But both of us have mutual understanding of the word ‘duty’ and an appreciation for the word ‘honor.’ He is and has been a man in the full sense of the word. Even when we were children playing ‘pebble’ (one of us would hide the pebble behind his back in one of his hands and would ask the

other which hand the pebble was in), he was a man. If the person guessed it wrong, he would receive a few hits on the palm of his hand with a twisted handkerchief. When it was time for punishment, most of the children argued and denied their wrong guesses, but my cousin was straightforward. He would extend his hand mechanically and painfully receive punishment to meet the conditions of the game.

“I picked him to negotiate with my wife and never thought of anyone else. Not even her mother for I feared the mother’s whisper and gossip would spread the scandal in the family. Unlike her, that cousin of mine can really keep a secret, even if his life was threatened. I phoned and asked him to come down to this hotel. He came in a hurry. It was in the afternoon or maybe a bit later. As I’ve done with you afterwards, I chose to put the Notebook in his hand to read first before I uttered a word because I was afraid I might lose my temper and end up painting an unfair picture of her. He took the Notebook to his house in Cairo after promising to read it and to come back to see me on the next day, for he couldn’t spend the night away from home because his wife had gone to Asyut to be by her pregnant sister’s side who was about to deliver a baby. He was left to run the house and take care of his two young children. His children are eight and six years old. As you can see, he got married a few years before me.

“My cousin came with the Notebook to see me the next day. But what a face he wore! He was pale to such an extent that it frightened me. His eyes informed me that my catastrophe was greater and more flagrant than I had thought. I felt pity for him and almost forgot my problem and began to think about his miserable condition. I made room for him next to me and said, ‘Be easy on yourself and don’t let my problem do this

to you. Let's deal with the matter calmly. You listen to what I intend to do and then tell me what your plans are.'

"He looked at the floor and said nothing except some mumbling coming out the depth of his wounded heart, 'Damn women.'

"I wanted to bring serenity back to his mind so we could work together to best solve the problem. But he jumped to his feet, as if he wasn't listening to me, and looked where the phone was placed and asked, 'Can I please call Asyut?'

"I stopped him and, somewhat puzzled, I inquired, 'Asyut?'

"Agitated, he said, 'Who knows, man! Who knows? It's true we have received a telegraph indicating that her sister was about to deliver a baby, and she went to see her. I called her last night and she was really there. But this isn't enough to convince me. She has been going to Asyut a lot lately. Why? And for whom? This year alone she went more than . . . more than . . .'

"He continued to rave with words about his wife, making me realize that I unconsciously made a big mistake. If you recall, the Notebook has some remarks about his wife and people's opinions about her and her conduct and my wife's defense of her. Here are the exact words my wife used to defend her: 'My poor girlfriend's only crime was that she wanted to live her life as a civilized creature and to breathe a little. But my aunt and those like her in my family thought my friend no better than a whore . . . It never crossed their minds to put themselves in her place and to think about her human weakness that may have played a major role. I was the only one who was sincerely able to forgive sins and faults on this earth.'

“What made me lose my mind and give a peaceful husband pages containing such words about his wife? In truth, I wasn’t aware of what I did. My eyes saw only what pertained to me, not to him. Sometimes self-centeredness takes hold of us, and selfishness becomes a part of each of our senses, just like a motor is a part of every machine.

“I gave him the Notebook unaware it contained material that could hurt him. Perhaps he, too, concentrated only on reading what pertained to him. I solicited his opinion on the matter. He expressed his pain regarding what he had read about my wife, consoling me at times and being furious on my behalf at other times. But most of the time he forgot his role as a friend and kinsman with a mission and one whose opinion and advice were important to me. Instead, he acted only as a husband whose heart was snapped by doubt and suspicion.

“Indeed, he gradually forgot about my story and expanded on his, telling me that he, too, hadn’t slept the night he read the Notebook. He said that he furiously ransacked his house in the calm of the night while his children and the servants slept, looking in his wife’s boxes, suitcases, closets and clothes. He opened what was easy to open and forced open what wasn’t. He, too, was looking for his wife’s confessions! Of course he found nothing, for not all women write their confessions or keep notebooks. This is undoubtedly one advantage of my adventurous, liberty-loving, and civilized wife. Besides, his wife is older than mine anyway and her circumstances, inclinations, and personality make her different from my wife as far as the way she handles things at least, provided they share the same principles. But my cousin fell prey to the disgraceful pages he read and couldn’t differentiate between the two. He was under the illusion that his

wife walked the same course of infidelity as mine did. His imagination began to supply him with details to which he paid little attention at first. But now they make him tremble. He, too, went away from home on business from time to time and heard his wife say the sort of things he read in her friend's Notebook. Her perfume and clothes pleased him like my wife's pleased me. They pleased him because he thought they were satisfying to her as a modern woman. But he never suspected her loyalty or honesty.

"He, too, believed every word his wife had said and never suspected her. The atmosphere of trust between them knitted by intimacy, solid attachment, physical warmth, family name, children, and the pains and hopes of life made him live in a world of tranquility, where his sense of suspicion abated, his watchful eyes closed, and his acumen yawned and went to sleep. He was, like all husbands, the last one to know, as the saying goes.

"Marriage is the valley of the blinds, where they fail to see what happened but see what did not. Or else, why did he choose to believe that his wife picked the road of sin and went as far as committing adultery? And why did he base this assumption on my wife's words, which pointed to no particular sin? These were some of the questions I used to persuade my cousin and to deal with his painful situation. But it seems that persuasion and logic in such matters are useless, for nothing is more dangerous than the eruption of a long-sleeping suspicion. When awakened, old suspicion becomes full of energy and forever sleepless.

"My cousin memorized all the words that pertained to his wife in the Notebook: 'she wanted to live her life as a civilized creature and to breathe a little . . . no better than a whore . . . sins and faults . . . etc.' It was as if every word had become an eye with which

he could read her life story anew. And what a horrible story it was. Every moment he would give me what he called new evidence of her crime, the latest of which was that dangerous but settled idea that their younger son was not his! Sedate as I have known him to be, he still swore that the boy was not his and challenged me to stare at the boy's face and examine its features because, as he claimed, the boy did not resemble him as the older son did. Why didn't he realize that before? It was useless to argue such a point with a man destined to such an end.

“When I looked at his face when he returned with the Notebook, I realized that it was my obligation to keep him from going back to his house in the condition he was in. I feared he would commit some kind of madness which he would regret later when calm. Besides, I was afraid of the impact of the initial shock and loneliness on him. I planned, therefore, to keep him for two or three days until we could think the matter over. We called his house and they brought him some clothes and other peripherals. Then he called some old kinswomen of his whom he trusted to stay at his house, care for his two sons, and take charge of the house and servants during his absence. He told everyone that his absence was work-related, and I made him take a sick leave for a few days, just like I'd done.

“We have been here ever since, as you've seen us. It was only last night that he first slept after I begged the doctor to give him a shot of morphin. I have ended up with two misfortunes, instead of only my own, by virtue of asking for his help.

“Now that I have finished telling you my story, can you see what I've gone through and pardon me for asking your opinion and advice?”

The husband became silent after he felt he had said everything that needed to be said. It was clear he was waiting for the Monk-Philosopher to say something.

It was not easy for the Monk-Philosopher to quit the atmosphere of the story right away and answer the husband because he, too, was no stranger to it. He was a character in it, even though the husband didn't know. Thoughts about his secret relationship with the heroine of this tragedy occasionally surfaced in his mind and could not be suppressed. Realizing that he had to say something, he raised his head and said in a sincere voice, "I'm at your service. You should not doubt that."

"Thank you," the husband mumbled.

The husband lowered his head and looked hesitant to speak. He had expected the Monk-Philosopher to say more than a statement of courtesy. The Monk-Philosopher, realizing what was expected of him, said, "Absolutely, there must be a solution."

The husband quickly elaborated, "I think my case is clear. As I have been saying, I want a quiet divorce and an immediate custody of my child. I don't care about anything after that. Have you any objection to that?"

"No, This is the only solution befitting a respectable and enlightened man like yourself," the Monk-Philosopher said in a tone of warm sincerity.

The husband stared into space and continued, "I suppose my cousin's problem is a more difficult and delicate one because, unlike mine, his wife's alleged adultery is questionable and her written confession is non-existent. He can neither ease his conscience nor make informed decisions. His suspicions and illusions torture him and lead him to nowhere. What do you think of his problem? What must he do? I suppose he cannot just divorce his wife and ruin his family because of mere suspicion. In



addition, I made him promise not to mention my wife's Notebook if he decided to confront his wife with what pertained to her in it. I told him that the Notebook is a secret and must be forgotten. What do you think?"

The Monk-Philosopher was puzzled and didn't know what to say. But he began to speak as if to himself, "My opinion? I don't want to bear the consequences of it, but I can tell you that suspicion, illusions, and doubts—without hard evidence—are more fatal and destructive to a person than the truth. You remember, of course, Othello's tragedy, but again if Shakespeare left the issue of Othello's jealousy and suspicion unsolved, am I to solve it for your cousin? I can offer some remedy, however, but with no assurance: frankness.

"Why doesn't your cousin go to his wife to speak frankly and reveal his suspicions to her behind closed doors and without mentioning the Notebook? Let him say, for instance, that such and such was brought to his attention and that he suspects so and so . . . Let him spell out everything and wait for the result. He will either detect things in his wife to confirm his suspicions, or find clues in her words and tone to prove her innocence. I suppose Othello should have done exactly the same right from the start before his jealousy became serious. Who knows what would be the outcome had he done that. Anyhow, I believe this to be the right answer.

"Do you remember the Hadith<sup>10</sup> of Falsehood in which we're told of that hideous accusation some people bestowed on 'Aysha, the wife of Prophet Mohamed. The torture the Prophet went through when he suspected his wife reflects the humane side in him. That incident in his life shouldn't pass unnoticed for it shows that he came to guide

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<sup>10</sup> Hadith, a saying attributed to the Prophet Mohamed. Collections of Hadith compliment the Quran as the Muslim scripture.

humanity even though he was human himself. Like anyone else, he was subject to earthly suffering. But he was exemplary in his handling of the matter: he spoke frankly with his wife. I urge your cousin to do the same and to deal with the matter in a calm and cool manner, because the future of the children hangs in the balance. Your cousin should not confront his wife while furious and floundering in the darkness of his conflicting emotions.”

“Do you suppose one can keep his cool and clarity of mind in situations like these?”

“I didn’t say it’s easy, but he has to try. You ought to convince him and show him ways to control himself so that he can see things clearly before making a decision.”

The husband looked down for a moment then said, “How can I convince him to do something I could not do? Don’t ask me to confront my wife as well. Don’t even try, please.”

The husband’s last sentence came out almost like a scream in which anger, horror, violence, and determination were tangled together. The Monk-Philosopher hurried to say, “No, you shouldn’t worry because your situation is different. It hasn’t even crossed my mind.”

Reassured, the husband said, “My situation is definitely different for I have nothing to say to my wife after she said everything herself in the Notebook. I have read more than enough of her confessions to condemn her. But my cousin must read his wife’s confessions through her eyes.”

“This is exactly what I meant to say,” the Monk-Philosopher said as though breathing a sigh of relief.

The husband kept silent for a while then said, "Now that we have taken care of my cousin's affair, as directed by you, my own remains to be discussed. As I have mentioned to you, I depended on my cousin to negotiate with my wife, but I think we both agree now that he is no longer fit for the mission, for he has enough troubles of his own. There is no escape from finding someone else and it shouldn't take long I suppose, because however careful in my search I will not find a man as trustworthy, calm, wise and with sound judgment as you."

The Monk-Philosopher yelled as if he were suddenly pricked, "Me?!"

Seeing no reason for the Monk-Philosopher to yell like that, the husband began to examine his face. Meanwhile, the Monk-Philosopher regained control of himself and softened his voice, "I'm . . . I'm wondering why you think I'm fit for this mission."

"Why not? I don't see any reason for this mission to be carried out by one of my relatives. I have full trust in you and feel that you can complete it thoroughly and in an atmosphere of secrecy," the husband said with conviction.

"There is nothing I would like more than to help you in such circumstances, but . . ."

"Don't say 'but.' By God don't say it. When I first saw you here this idea flashed in my head like lightning. It came down to me like a revelation, and I purposely placed the Notebook in your hand and waited to ask for your help later on. As you can see, I'm by myself in this. Will you disappoint me?"

The Monk-Philosopher bent his head down for a while, thinking. It seemed odd for him to turn down the man's request. It's true he hated to see her and meet her face to face, but the tension between them was far less than between her and her husband.

Seeing that he was undoubtedly more able to talk to her, the Monk-Philosopher decided

to lift that burden off the poor husband, to suppress his own discomfort, and to meet with her. He raised his head and said with resolve, "So be it."

"Thank you . . . I will never forget your good deed," the husband said as they shook hands.

The Monk-Philosopher reflected for a moment, then said as though speaking to himself, "Is she home? Will I go see her at her house? No! I will not. After all I'm a stranger, of course. How can I visit her without her husband being there? Wouldn't that feed people's curiosity? If you don't mind, I can ask her by phone to come to my place."

"Do what you will," the husband said in a relaxed and unhesitant voice.

"Is she still at your house?"

The husband reflected and said, "I don't know. Ever since I left the house, I have no idea what became of her. But if I'm not mistaken she is there. I know her very well. She is smart. Undoubtedly, she has figured out by now everything about my sudden disappearance and gave the illusion to all that I went away on business then sat, waiting."

"Waiting?"

"Yes, for my next move."

The two men were silent for a brief time, then the husband cried to the other, "My daughter! I beg you to bring me my daughter. Save her from that mother. I won't ask you for anything else. My daughter . . . My daughter . . . My daughter's reputation and future."

"I promise you that," the Monk-Philosopher said it in a whisper full of determination.

### **The Meeting**

The Monk-Philosopher left for Cairo on the same day. No sooner had he made it to his home than he called the wife. He did that unconsciously, as though he was instructed by a push of the hand of that unlucky husband. He was preoccupied only with carrying out that which the husband entrusted him. He was able to convince himself that that woman was now foreign to him now, and that he could meet with her while keeping his calm as if he was seeing her for the first time. He had promised himself to make their conversation brief and official, like a conversation between a lawyer and his client's opponent in a civil suit. For the matter was simple: either she would accept her husband's offer or refuse it. Undoubtedly she would accept his generous offer to avoid a scandal, he thought.

But no sooner had he heard her spoiled voice on the phone pronouncing the word "hello" than he began to tremble. In spite of his recent opinion of her, her old and familiar voice still had an impact on him because he, like any other human being, had a deep spot in himself closed to virtue and vice and permitting no light of reason or will. That spot admits no logic, laws, or languages. It is a remote kingdom without words or meanings. Everything in it is transparent and can bring wonder in a blink of an eye. An echo of a tone, a flash of a glimpse, or a scent of perfume are enough to trigger feelings,

images, and memories from its depths, causing us to shake and opening our eyes to things we cannot describe or represent, however precise our words or language.

Afraid his voice would tremble on the phone, the Monk-Philosopher took a moment to regain control of himself until he heard “Hello . . . hello” again. He then cleared his throat and quickly introduced himself. She was pleasantly surprised. Fearing the conversation would become lengthy, embarrassing, or pointless, he quickly informed her that he was asked by her husband to see her for a matter of importance and that the sooner the better. She said she would come see him that evening. He hung up quickly to give the impression of his seriousness and professionalism. Then he sat by his desk waiting for her, as he did in the past. How incredible, he thought. He was waiting for her as before: sitting by his desk and staring at the door with desperate and submissive eyes. She was to come shortly and her feet would cross his threshold once again. Her comeback this time was real, not the usual dream. But it was different from her previous visits.

His hand reached for his files and retrieved a bundle of letters he had written to her. He began to read some of his lines to her: *“Thus was the behavior of Isis. You would have done the same had you been in her shoes, because you, my dear friend, undoubtedly have the same loving and loyal heart. . . . A rare woman is the greatest gift from God. . . My dear! If I’m asked about you, I will reply, ‘She is everything in my life.’ . . . let your spirit walk by my side in my lonely road. . . . Who would believe that my love for you is a living being? No one, not even you, sees this love which illuminates the bottom of my soul, like the luster of a pearl. . . . I see you in every great wife who was able to make her husband*

*happy throughout history. . . . I'm sure you're at your husband's side, caring for him with that tenderness I know so well in you. . . . You always remind me of the ideal wife."*

He couldn't control himself. He imagined that his hand, which had described that woman as the "ideal wife," was now, undoubtedly, ridiculing his trust in and judgment of her. Then he began to tear up the letters and to fill his trash basket with them.

Indeed, he was a fool! How could he mistaking her for a better person in that fashion? He wondered how could his eyes see a spiritual beauty and heavenly nobility in such a creature? Was it a bad judgment on his part? Or was it the artist in him who transformed the ugly into beautiful and the trivial into majestic? He did to her what a kaleidoscope does to pieces of colorful paper and fragments of glass by turning them to gorgeous images and harmonious shapes!

Perhaps transforming the ugly into beautiful is just another task of the man of letters, an idea the Monk-Philosopher probably had in mind when he characterized this ideal woman in his letters. If his letters were to be made available to the masses, people would have the opportunity to see a picture of a virtuous woman, who would fill them with hope and strengthen their faith in goodness, virtue, and moral beauty. Must people be deprived of this beautiful illusion by informing them that what they have seen of ideal perfection and heavenly beauty were in fact nothing but pieces of the life of a chameleon-like woman with a stained reputation? Must they be told that what they have seen was a woman whose parts were cheaper and more fragile than fragments of glass? But what would be gained by such disclosure? Why shock people and make that fraud known to them? What if people know that these human fragments were reflected in that bogus kaleidoscopic mirror, found in the heart of the writer or the mind of the artist, and

projected to people as a magnificent creation? Undoubtedly, the duty of every writer is to make people believe that there exists a world of righteousness, goodness, and virtue. A writer, the Monk-Philosopher thought, is free to choose whatever method and style he sees fit to implant this illusion in the minds of his readers. But then he wondered why he used the word “illusion” instead of “faith!” Did he, too, lose faith in virtue because a woman had disappointed him?

Indeed, the Monk-Philosopher thought and behaved in that situation not as a man of letters or a thinker would but only as a “man” would. This is why he dared to destroy his letters. For had he behaved like an artist, he would have kept his letters and said: “Why should I care about reality after I excelled in creating the model? Or, what have my letters to do with that woman? I addressed my letters to the image of a woman, not to that woman herself! The image I created and the feelings were mine, then. So, I see no problem with keeping my letters—or mental creations—or with publishing them if I wish, like other works of mine.” But the deceived and agonized man in him felt, thought, and decided for him. Like her husband who decided to cut off all ties with her, the Monk-Philosopher, who was a kind of a spiritual husband, decided to sever his relationship with her. He thought of destroying the only materialistic thing that connected him with her: the letters. It was inevitable to tear them up. It made him somewhat relieved afterwards.

Time passed quickly and it was already evening. Her time to see him was drawing nearer. She was on her way. He heard echoes of her footsteps through his fast-beating heart, as though there was a wire connecting the two. He wondered why his heart beat that fast. It was not love, he was sure of that for he only hated and scorned her now.



More likely, he thought, it was that confusion people get when going through extraordinary encounters. He felt many conflicting emotions at the same time: he was relieved to see her but wanted to believe that it was only curiosity.

No doubt he longed to see her face and what became of it and to listen to her words and figure out their implications. But he feared her encounter and wished to see her beauty gone, so that he could receive her calmly and carelessly. He felt rage, anger, grief and regret to see her coming back without that moral and pure attire with which she had left the room last time. All these emotions emerged and disrupted his peace. He decided to calm down and get ready to meet with his visitor in his usual calm way, which she was accustomed to.

The doorbell rang. He got up, in spite of himself, then sat down when he became conscious of himself. He pretended to write when his servant opened the door for her. Then he heard her asking about him and listened to her steps as she came in.

“Bon soir, Sir.”

He raised his head slowly and replied with a whisper then asked her to take a seat. He went back to writing: it was the best way for him to buy time to calm his fear, for when he glanced at her, he regretted that her beauty and charm were unchanged.

But unlike her past beauty, her current one was of a different kind. It was dangerous, combat-ready, challenging, victimizing, frightening, villainous, and sinful. Her makeup alone confirmed that. The color she wore on her lips and the care she took in applying her eye shadow and in selecting her perfume all cried, “Beware!” No longer was she the fresh flower she once was. Instead, she had turned, for reasons of which he was aware, into a bright and colorful flower but with a poisonous nectar. She became a kind of

carnivorous flower, blossoming out nicely only to attract its prey and then close in on it. He was not sure, however, whether his glance at her was responsible for all these reflections or whether everything was the work of illusion. For he was aware that he wasn't expecting an innocent woman but one of a bad reputation. Whatever the case, she was there with her past and present, charm and beauty. All what he had to do was to ignore her looks and forget about her person and reputation and get down to the business assigned to him. Only then could he get out of it all.

He picked a moment when he was calm and at ease, pushed aside the papers on the desk with his arm, and turned to her saying, in a business-like tone, "The reason you have honored me with your presence is this . . ."

The pretty wife interrupted him, "Pardon me! Can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead."

"You told me on the phone that you had met my husband. Where was that?"

"Helwan."

"Oh, he is in Helwan then. But I didn't mean the last time you met him. I meant the first."

"The first time! He honored me with his visit here."

"When was that?"

"More than a year ago."

"Do you recall the reason he visited you then?"

"It was because . . . because of you."

"Of me? Why?"

"To talk about you and reading and literature."

“And you knew me then?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Didn’t you see me on that same day?”

“Of course.”

“Where?”

“Here, you honored me with your visits from time to time.”

“My visit today, then, is not my first, and our acquaintance is not the work of this hour. You have to agree with me, then, that it’s odd to receive me with this dry statement after a year of absence.”

The Monk-Philosopher lowered his head and became confused for a while. He pretended to write with a pen on a piece of paper. Then, without looking at her, said, “I’m sorry, how would you like me to address you? I don’t think I’ve quite changed my way of conversing with you.”

“You should admit that you have never been excessively nice to me. But even with your lack of endearment and caution with me, I have always felt you were yourself until now.”

“I meant to save you time and get right to the subject.”

She was involuntarily silent for a moment then said, “I’m listening!” She said it slowly while taking a fancy pack of cigarettes out of her purse. She put a cigarette in her mouth and offered him one, but he thanked her.

“Oh, I’ve forgotten you don’t smoke,” she said smiling.

“And I’ve never seen you smoke before today.”

He avoided talking about such things and preferred to begin tackling the serious matter at hand but didn't know how to start. He turned to her as if asking for help, "Why do you suppose your husband is away from home?"

"Don't ask me questions, please. Get right to the point and say what you wish and expect nothing from me but listening," she said in a challenging tone while lighting her cigarette with an expensive gold lighter.

He was silent for a moment. Seeing that the discussion in such an atmosphere would lead to nothing, he changed his tone a bit, "Do you still insist that I received you badly?"

"Absolutely, I thought you would at least appreciate my accepting your invitation after you'd ousted me more than a year ago. You told me right in this room to stop visiting you."

"Your presence here today is because of a private matter that has to do with you and your husband."

"I could have asked you to tell me everything over the phone! But the minute you invited me, I came without hesitation."

"This is not the first time you enter a man's house without hesitation."

He uttered the last sentence in a tone full of meaning and determination. She turned quickly to him and seemed to catch his drift, but she was neither upset nor opposing. She only smiled in acceptance. Puffing on her cigarette, she said, "I don't mind your harsh treatment and scolding, which you'd done sometimes in the past. But how did it dawn on you that this isn't the first time I have entered a man's house without hesitation? Did my husband tell you . . .?"

“Yes, he told me everything,” he answered quickly, as if ridding himself of a burden and taking advantage of her direct tackling of the matter.

She took another long drag on her cigarette and calmly said, “And of course he made you read . . .?”

“Your Notebook!” he said quickly while looking at her and watching the movement of her eyes.

But to his surprise, she remained calm and kept staring at him, as though reading his thoughts. Doubtful of his ability to keep up with her stare, he took his eyes off her and began fumbling with his pen. She released a long and soft laugh which wafted to the ceiling with the smoke in the room.

“What are you waiting for? Go ahead and give me your opinion on what you read.”

He remained calm and said, “It is not my opinion you must seek; it is your husband’s.”

“My husband isn’t a specialist in this matter, you are!”

“I am?” he said, puzzled.

She reacted with a smile and said, “You forgot already that I’m your student! You should know, my dear teacher, that your lessons have come to fruit.”

“I ask God’s forgiveness!” he said in a tone of sorrow, embarrassment, objection, and fright.

She didn’t bother with what he was driving at and said, “Perhaps I’d be conceited, or maybe too conceited, to compare myself to you or my work to yours, or to claim that I’ve written something worthy of your attention. What you have read was no more than my first attempt at writing fiction. But I find it compelling to show my appreciation for the

favor you'd done me. After all, you were the one who made me like books and reading, which encouraged me to try my hand at writing. I wrote that Notebook in my spare time and intended to bring it down to you when I finished and to make it my reason for coming here to see you. Unfortunately, it disappeared before that. I'd trusted that my Notebook would intercede for me and convince you that I was serious when I first came to you to implant the love of literature in me; that you had done me injustice by asking me never to come back; that I showed respect for you by following the same course you'd put me on, even after you asked me to leave; that I was able to write something that was satisfactory to you and would make you regret mistrusting me. But fate had it that my work would get to you prematurely and by a different hand. This doesn't concern me, however. What really counts is your reading my humble Notebook. Although I believe this experiment will not win your complete approval, I find myself happy for my accomplishment and anxious for your opinion with all the frankness and harshness that go with it. Speak! Why do you look at me like that?"

Her words came as a complete surprise to him, for he never expected them. She was innocent, then, and her so-called confession was only fiction, he thought. The mountain of charges against her collapsed, and the reason behind his mission no longer existed. She didn't betray her husband or him, or stain her honor or the image he drew of her in his mind. He began to regret his haste in tearing up his letters to her. He wished her words to be true. He stared at her face, as if to penetrate her and reach for the truth. He finally said, in a tone indicative of neither belief nor suspicion, "Your confessions weren't real, then?"

"Absolutely not."

“What about the movie star?”

“I’ve never seen him in my life.”

“Just a character?”

“Of course!”

“And all these incidents, details, and events are the weaving of your fancy?”

“Yes.”

“What a rich fancy!” he said indifferently that she could not discern whether he was being sarcastic or serious.

She wanted to know what he meant, “I suppose you’ve never thought I have such a rich imagination?”

“I must confess, I’ve never thought it to be that good.”

“I’m overwhelmed! Talk to me about my skill in writing.”

“No, let’s talk about a more important matter: your skill in defense.”

“Defense?” she said it in a gloomy and objecting tone.

“In truth, it’s a very clever defense; no one would ever think of. I don’t know how you were able to prepare such a clever defense on such a short notice! They say you’re smart, and I’ve noticed that, but you’ve done it to perfection today. A woman is an able actress by nature. But you played the role better than any one, especially when it comes to faking and lying. I don’t think you have forgotten your words to me once that you had as much a passion for lying as you had for movies, tennis, horserace, and playing cards. Unfortunately for you, I have a very good memory particularly when it has to do with you.”

She didn't object to his violent tone but stared sharply at him, "Your opinion does not surprise me."

"My duty compels me to be frank with you. Besides, you just asked me to be frank, and I am," he said while sketching with his pen on a piece of paper.

"Unfortunately this has been your opinion of me since I first saw you. All I can say is that I'm unlucky with you," she said after a brief sigh.

"I don't think I have done you injustice. Maybe I misunderstood you and held you in a higher regard," he whispered the last sentence so she wouldn't hear it. Then he looked with one eye, in spite of himself, at the fragments of his letters in the basket and said, "Now, Madame, can you tell me the truth, not for my sake but for your husband's. For up to now we haven't advanced in tackling the subject for which we met."

She wore a serious look and said harshly, "It is I who wish to ask: Why don't you believe me, and by what right do you permit yourself to attach such a dangerous accusation to me, and why do you call my telling the truth a clever defense? I don't suppose my husband appointed you to persecute me. But if he did, I certainly would like to know."

He looked at her while unexpectedly calm for he had feared their meeting and thought he couldn't confront her without his heart racing and his tongue tied. It was because he was—in spite of everything—still living with her ghost and the sublime qualities he attached to it which raised it to the level of the ideal. It was his creation of her that he feared and felt weak and betrayed in its presence, but her real person represented him with no threat. In her presence, he felt secure and confident and the master of the situation.



He began to forget about her ghost and to examine the real woman—her words, innocence and guilt, and the implications of her submission and revolt. He concluded that he no longer feared her, but he couldn't claim that he wasn't interested in her either. His interest in her was always there, like the burning embers of a recently put out fire—unthreatening yet cannot be ignored. At that moment, however, he was only concentrating on his mission.

He smiled at her last harsh question to him and said, "Your noble husband didn't appoint me to persecute you. Perhaps it was nice of him to save me the trouble of such a burdensome appointment. It was you who made me believe that you appreciated my frankness and gave me the illusion that I was free to choose whatever side I wanted to be on. I've decided, therefore, to deliver judgment on you, not for you! That's all."

"Do you swear that your conscience is at ease with the judgment you bestowed on me?" she said in a calm and gentle tone, preferring lenity to tension.

"It is!"

"Do I have the right to know on what basis you judged me so, your honor?"

"Feeling—that which every woman believes in."

"Feeling?"

"I know it's insufficient proof in the court of law, but it is in this case. My feeling when I listen to your defense—if you permit me to use the word one more time—is different from that when I read your confessions. Right now, neither your lively person nor your flowing warm words have left any impact on me. But when I read your Notebook, every letter made my hair stand on end. On those frightening pages, you told the unedited truth in minute detail about incidents you had experienced. Your poor

husband almost went mad reading it, and I was given it one night. And what a night it was! I mean I, too, was about to go crazy. It was awful. It cannot be but the truth, narrated with precision. Every line in it speaks of something that had happened—undoubtedly. Oh, those pages are unbelievable. How can any woman write them?”

He bowed his head, and she looked at him in silence for a moment then said, “But this is insufficient evidence. Why can’t you admit that it’s my talent? Aren’t there some writers who can clothe illusion with the attire of reality?”

“This is nonsense. A writer can create events and forge incidents, but feelings must gush out from pure truth and from a heart that beats with them, as if they are one of its parts. Suppose we acknowledge that you invented the events and incidents in your Notebook, how can you explain the deep feelings you expressed in it? Your feelings were indicative of hidden inclinations on your part for passionate romantic adventures, as you hotly described on your pages.”

“Did you expect a woman to write on a different subject? Romantic adventures are every woman’s dream,” she said with a smile.

“Every woman of your type.”

“No, every woman in general, as long as she is beautiful and able to bewitch a man. Whoever tells you otherwise is lying. I know many women and countless wives whose primary conversations are about this kind of adventure. Time has changed but you still sit in seclusion with your books unaware of the changes taking place in society. I wonder what you will say about the many things going on in most of the families I know if I tell you about them. Trust me, it is the exception nowadays to find a wife who does not have a friend, a lover, or a companion besides her husband. She will not hesitate to have him

if she can. Today, it's an insult for a beautiful woman not to have admirers. Women tease one another with the number of admirers they have and compete among themselves to win the handsomest, most famous, and richest of men. I know a married friend who is proud of having the most precious collection of admirers. Every member of her group has something women yearn for. She has the good-looking, the rich and famous, and the funny. Everyone thinks she is his alone, but in reality they all are hers. All this goes on in society. I'm afraid you won't take my word for it if I tell you that this is the norm now in many homes and families with no threat to marriage or the sacred bond. So far, I haven't heard of a single incident of divorce or separation between the married women I know because of that. Many husbands don't even know much about their wives' adventures. But when they do, the consequences are normally minimal and their tempest often abate before endangering the marriage. Based on what I've just related to you about the modern woman, I hope you don't blame me for what I did. If I were you, I would go to my husband and advise him not to exaggerate the matter. I certainly hope you do just that, not for my sake or my husband's but for our marriage's and child's. It would be stupid for us to destroy everything because of what I did. Must I expect you to do that? Talk to me! Why do you stare at me like that?"

Actually he was staring at her in amazement when he realized that she wasn't acting but was conveying her conviction to him. What she said was expressive of her personality. She made the words with which she distorted morality as common as those of everyday usage. He began to wonder whether there was no morality left in society and whether words like virtue, chastity, and shame were deleted from the modern dictionary without his knowledge.

She was still waiting for him to reply when she took out a red lipstick and powder from her purse and began to put them on. He watched her and recalled the day when putting on makeup had to be done behind closed doors, not in the open and before the eyes of men. He recalled the day only the adulteress smoked and the whore drank. Today, liberal women smoke and drink in public and take liberty in pronouncing the word “lover,” which used to be whispered by women in the past as if they were confessing sin. It didn’t come as surprise to him to hear women speak of their lovers and admirers in the same fashion they spoke of their dresses. They commended romantic conversations with their lovers as often as they smoked their cigarettes and described details of their affairs with the same care they took in applying their lipstick. If all this is the norm now, why argue with her, he thought. But she was still staring at him, waiting for him to reply.

He didn’t know precisely what she desired of him but turned to her at last, “I still don’t know exactly what you expect of me.”

“I expect you, Sir, not to be a hangman but an arbitrator—one who will help us reconcile our differences,” she said calmly.

“An arbitrator?” he inquired in a mixture of astonishment, shock, and sarcasm.

“Why not? Does it please you to see me and my husband live in peace?” she asked calmly and with a smile.

“Of course it pleases me, but . . .” he said, somewhat hesitant.

“But what? It is the best of favors you can do for us. Who knows, maybe this was the mission assigned to you by my husband in the first place!”

“On the contrary!”

“Were you commissioned then to put gasoline on fire?”

“No, Madame, only to make you aware of his demands.”

“What are they? Separation, of course?”

“Quiet divorce and he gets custody of the child.”

“This is exactly what I’d expected, being familiar with my husband’s rational and sedate way of arriving at solutions. But if we come to you for arbitration and ask the advice of your knowledgeable mind, wouldn’t you say it’s best for us to repair our collapsing nest and to raise our daughter in our laps?”

“I’m commissioned by your husband to inform not to arbitrate.”

She was silent for a moment, then said, “Well, you did inform me on behalf of my husband, would you mind informing him of what I told you—that which you called ‘defense’? Tell him that I resent being accused of adultery and that the Notebook is only a fiction. Will you please tell him this and bring back his response?”

The Monk-Philosopher thought about what she said for a moment then said, “I have no objection to doing that.”

She got up to leave, saying, “I don’t aspire to have you on my side or to make you speak to my advantage with my husband, for I still think I’m unlucky with you. You have never been sympathetic to me, but I still expect you will not hurt me with a word you say against me. Be completely neutral, at least.”

“I grant you that.”

### **The Ideal Wife**

The Monk-Philosopher returned to Helwan the next day to present the husband with the wife's response. The husband cheerfully received him and showed admiration and appreciation for the quickness with which he was handling the matter. But no sooner had the husband listened to what he had to say than he was hit with a variety of rapid emotions. At first, he saw a glimmer of hope which made his heart beat quickly when the Monk-Philosopher related that the wife was innocent and that what she wrote was no more than fiction. Like a lightning bolt illuminating a dark night and uncovering its stacked dark clouds, the talk of her innocence illuminated him briefly from within. But his hope was short-lived. The words of her Notebook which he knew by heart came to haunt him and the dark clouds began to hover above him once again. He couldn't believe what he had heard. He turned to the Monk-Philosopher and said, with admonishment and bitterness, "You left me yesterday in my soothing certainty only to bring me the painful uncertainty today! As you know, I have pitied my cousin for the torture of suspicion he has been going through and praised God for endowing me with certainty about what my wife did. Do you believe her? Can't you see she is trying to cover her act and declare herself innocent? Answer me! Did you believe what she told you? Can you really believe her? Tell me the truth as you feel it. What do you think? I want your opinion."

The Monk-Philosopher was silent for a moment then entreated the husband, “Do me a favor? Don’t ask for my opinion. This is a sensitive family matter, and I prefer not to give any opinion. All I can do is play the role of a messenger or envoy between the two of you. Make me only your means of communication, that’s all.”

“Do you think it is right to leave prey to my suspicion?”

“I’m sorry. Think for yourself and listen to your heart and feelings and believe in nothing but your own opinion. Apparently you’re aware of how delicate this situation is for me, so please don’t put me in an awkward position.”

“I understand,” the husband said in a submissive tone that invited pity. He lowered his head and was absorbed in his thoughts. Then he suddenly got up saying, “Excuse me, wait here for a moment,” and disappeared. He came back shortly holding the Red Notebook. He sat down and randomly began to flip the pages and scan paragraphs. Then he cried, “Don’t tell me this is fiction and the work of imagination. Listen to this, listen please, ‘in spite of my husband’s indifference towards me and the lack of emotional excitement I felt when he touched me, he had never done me any harm. Even now, he still cherishes and loves me.”

‘Suddenly I began to discern the ghost of my frightening and hideous action, and the painful consequences I would have gone through had I chosen to follow my desire and run away from my home and sever my marital relation in such a fashion. At that moment, some remnants of conscience and fidelity awakened in me. I refused, under any circumstances, to make my husband and child victims of my weakness, errors, and emotions—all of which proved to be stronger than my will. My fear of ruining my daughter stopped me and paralyzed my will.

‘There was another thing I thought about: what kind of future awaited me going to a man without a penny in my pocket? And how could a woman without a fortune like me—particularly if I was to be separated from my family and too proud to ask my mother for money—burden this actor with my food, clothes, makeup, and extravagance? My pride couldn’t permit such a thing to happen. But even if my weakness and love for him overcame my pride, could he afford to bear this burden for long? No. I decided to never let myself be misled by love to such an extent. For a love relationship doesn’t necessarily have to end up with the lovers running away together. In addition, it probably never crossed his mind to destroy my marital nest and to have me running with him after I sever my sacred bond with my husband. He certainly is aware of the consequences of such an action.

‘Besides, the mere idea of running away with him was enough to extinguish his fiery passion for me. Undoubtedly what he meant when he uttered his proposal—and when we were both intoxicated with passion—was for me to find a way or come up with an excuse to leave home and go with him for a few weeks to Palestine or elsewhere—behind my husband’s and family’s backs.

‘I find this impossible, no matter how tricky I am. Suffice then the amount of time we spend together for the time being, or else we’ll face a disaster none of us wishes to see.’

The husband stopped reading and turned to the Monk-Philosopher saying, “Tell me, how can this be fictitious when the characters and their environment are the same as in real life: the husband, the child, the wife, and her mother? This lady, or mistress, wants us to believe that she is innocent so that she can keep the marriage and use it to her



advantage and to her lover's for the reasons she stated here. She wants to keep the husband so that she can keep the lover. It's clear and simple. Only idiots will believe her because she has no argument. People probably count me with the idiots because of what she had done to me. But I think it is too much for me to be made an idiot of for a second time, given what I know now. Her current attempt to make me buy into her illusion is belittling me and insulting my intelligence. No, Sir, please go to her promptly and make her sign a paper giving me custody of the child and swear to her on my behalf that she will never be my wife again, even if what she claims is the truth. For I cannot entrust my daughter with a mother accustomed to writing such disgusting lines."

He nervously closed the Notebook and wanted to get up, but the Monk-Philosopher seized him saying, "What if she refuses to hand the child over to me and sticks to her legitimate right of custody?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just a supposition, you know. I want to be ready for whatever comes out."

"If she refuses, make it plain to her that I will not hesitate then to go the other way—the court and the scandal that goes with it—which I have been trying to avoid for her sake and for the child's. I will then submit her written confessions as evidence to the court. I suppose she knows that no court will grant her custody of the child after reading what she had written. It will be more appropriate if she can understand what I'm trying to accomplish and appreciate my effort to protect our reputation. A quiet divorce and my custody of the child are in the interest of all of us. She will be better off, therefore, not to cause any troubles. That's all."

The husband looked at the Monk-Philosopher to see if he had more questions, but the latter signaled to him that he had heard enough.

“How is your cousin?” the Monk-Philosopher asked while extending his hand to take leave.

“Bad,” the husband replied in a tone of anxiety and sorrow. “The idea that his younger son is not his is the most devastating part of this affair. It dominates him dangerously. He went to see his son yesterday behind my back and came back in a dreadful condition. He wept and assured me that the son was not his, adding that the son had innocently asked him, ‘Why do you keep staring at my face like that, dad?’ He doesn’t know what to do with him or with his wife, or whether he is right or wrong. This poor man is really in a terrifying situation. He doesn’t sleep or eat anymore. He is about to have a nervous breakdown.”

The Monk-Philosopher tightened his grip as a sign of support then silently took leave of him and went back to Cairo.

He called the wife on the same day and asked her to come to his place to relate her husband’s final decision to her. She came in the evening and took her seat by his desk. But before uttering a word, he handed her a paper and pen and told her in a quick and determined tone, “Write down!”

“Write down what?” she asked, surprised.

“Your acceptance of all his conditions in order for you to avoid a scandal.”

She stared at him while searching her mind, “Is there hope anymore?”

“Absolutely not! Not a chance.” he briefly answered.

“Tell me what happened with him first: What did you tell him and what did he tell you?”

He related everything to her—every letter uttered by her husband, every word he read from her confessions, the details of his opinion and position, and his intention in case of her acceptance or refusal of his offer. She thought about all that for a moment then took a box of cigarettes out of her purse and lighted one with her lighter. She blew smoke in the air and said with disgust, “How mad husbands are!”

He wondered about such a statement and kindly inquired from her, “What has your husband done that made you label him ‘mad’?”

“Don’t you see how foolish his behavior has been?”

“What about yours?”

She sighed in despair, “I’ve lost hope in you! You’re always against me and see nothing in me except my errors and lapses. Can you tell me what wrong have I done you? You’ve never paid attention or appreciated my friendliness and affection towards you!”

He was almost thunderstruck to hear her last words but said in a hoarse voice, “Your husband, Madame, is the victim.”

“What about me? Don’t I pass for a victim since he is the one wishing to deprive me of my home and daughter because of mad jealousy?”

“Is it madness for a husband to be jealous about his honor?”

“Quit such talk! It amazes me to listen to you talk like backward, old-fashioned people. Times have changed, and people have modified their views on such matters. Only lower class folks still exaggerate these things. You hear from time to time that a

certain husband slaughtered his wife or sister because of jealousy or suspicion of her behavior. But in our upper class, we shouldn't at all make tragedies out of these trivialities. How can you, the free thinker as you pretend to be, forget that liberty is the cornerstone of everything now? A woman, like a man, is a free creature. A wife is no longer a piece of furniture placed in a locked room but a human being with the right to breathe and live. She must always remember that her heart was born free to love and hate, and that her body was born free to be granted or denied according to her will and desire. Marriage shouldn't be interpreted as a chain placed around a woman's neck, for today's women approve of no shackles, even if they are made of gold."

He shook his head and whispered to himself: "Thank goodness! I'm not married."

"What are you saying?"

"Nothing. I just want to draw your attention to the fact that marriage is, before anything, a contract, not a shackle, between two parties. Each party enjoys certain rights but with certain duties required of him or her. You were aware, of course, of the content of your contract before you signed it and agreed to honor its conditions. You're not in bondage, then, but you're being asked to honor your agreement."

"No, Sir. Don't confuse me, please. I see no difference between a shackle and a contract, for both deprive us of our freedom. The reason you call it a contract today is that we have forced you to acknowledge our freedom. But in reality it is still bondage. It was bondage in the literal sense of the word back in the old days. I shiver every time I remember what I had read in my French Nun School about the wives of medieval soldiers. Those noble soldiers used to make chains out of steel, wrap them around the bottom part of their wives, and lock them with keys which they had kept with them when

going to war. That so-called 'chastity belt' used to remain around the lower part of the wife until the husband would come back from the long war. The husband would then unlock it and free his woman's body. What would you call such a marriage? Is it a contract or a bondage?"

"How mad husbands are, exactly as you just said. How could they have neglected such a precious belt today? I believe many husbands desperately need this wonderful belt today. I'm surprised they don't ask for it to be included with every bride's set of furniture, instead of that 'American bar' one finds in every set of contemporary weddings."

She stared at him, "Are you joking? You must be joking!"

"You may be right to think of what I've just said as a joke! . . . What use? Every utterance that can't be put into practice is a kind of joke."

"What if that 'chastity belt' was in practice today?" she asked, smiling.

"You could not have ventured behind your husband's back." (Of course he didn't let her hear that last sentence). He was silent, and she resumed the conversation with a cunning wink of her eye, "Do you suppose the modern woman is so stupid that she won't find a solution to this problem if she wishes? Rest assured she is capable of making a set of keys to that belt or chain."

"I believe you! With modern science and industry, the modern woman can get the help she needs."

"Nothing will be left for the honored husband to do, except to replace the lock and key with a seal of red wax with his fine signature on it in order to perfect his mockery."

“Don’t worry. I don’t think it’s the intention of many contemporary men to make mockeries of this kind. If I have it right, they have given up surveillance and left their wives with no watcher except their conscience. The result is very satisfactory, I suppose!”

She glanced at him and said, “I don’t like your sarcasm, dull emotions, or backward ideas. Tell me, since we’re talking frankly: given that a woman’s freedom to love is everything in her life, why deny it to her?”

“Do you mean her freedom to love whoever she desires?”

“Something like that.”

“I don’t see any reason for me to discuss this from a moral point of view, for I don’t like to lecture in morality at all. Lessons in morality have become boring to the majority of people—including yourself, undoubtedly. Words like virtue, vice, chastity, and shame have lost their meaning and become commonplace in slighting and joking. But I can tell you this: A woman is free to do whatever she wants before marriage. She can love and woo whomever she likes. But she must pay attention to this simple intuition: Whoever breaks society’s norms will be broken by them.”

“Trust me, our modern society breaks no one.”

“This is not for me to debate. It should be left to the intelligence of women and the commonsense of society to decide. A woman or a girl may either find, in spite of her wild flirtation and unruly liberty, that society still looks at her with respect and nominates her for marriage, or she may find herself dropped from the list of the virtuous, abandoned by men, and chased away. Having been liberated from the control of men—as you’ve just said, the unmarried woman has only society to judge her behavior. Walls of society

alone are capable of limiting her unruliness and determining her proper place within them. Society has become her guardian. It rewards or punishes her, admonishes or forgives her, labels her chaste or writes on her forehead, with her own red lipstick, 'This is a misfit.'”

“This is the unmarried woman, what about the married?”

“As I have already told you, any married woman must have signed a contract pledging love and loyalty to her husband. She must, therefore, fulfill her promise. Today’s woman keeps talking about her freedom, but the real freedom can only be realized through honoring contracts, not breaching them.”

“As I’ve already told you, I will honor no contract that seeks to control my heart and feelings. Maybe I was in love with my husband at the time of signing the contract, but I can’t guarantee loving him afterwards. What then is the value of a contract built upon variable human feelings?”

“When you change your feelings,” he said, “ you must change the contract as well. You should go to your husband and very calmly tell him, ‘My feelings have changed direction towards another person and I no longer can keep my promise of loyalty to you. Up to now, I have honored our contract, but honesty compels me to ask you for a divorce.’ This is what any woman ought to do, provided that her new feelings are true and her inclination is more than a short-lived lust. In reality, however, a woman uses her husband’s name and money to ornament her infidelity. She brings cheating to her quiet nest and fraud to the contract. That contract assigns duties to each one: the husband struggles to earn a living and to meet the needs of his wife, and she struggles, at least, to curb her inclinations towards other men and to manage the house with the available

resources. Why then does the wife want to steal her husband's money to ornament herself for another man? And why must the husband work hard to earn a living for a woman who sleeps with another man, who doesn't care whether she has bread on her table or not? You ridicule the "chastity belt" and the noble soldiers, but you never lament them when they give up their lives in wars for the defense of their homes and wives. Is it fair for them to come back and find their wives committing adultery with men who never shed a drop of blood for them? Why is it always amusing for the wife to turn her husband into a bull, pulling life's waterwheel and bringing out water to quench her thirst for pleasure?"

"What an excellent defense on behalf of the husband!" she said, smiling and lighting a cigarette.

"No, on behalf of both."

"How come you don't speak with such zeal about men committing adultery?"

"I've never approved of a husband cheating on his wife!"

"If he cheats on her, does she have the right to cheat on him?"

"No."

"You just sound like any other man. Again, men deny us what they approve for themselves because they think they're the masters and we the slaves."

"No, it is because a man works hard to make a living, but a woman only spends what he earns. If you want to have equal rights with your husband, you must both sacrifice and work as hard as he does. I'm not suggesting that a husband should cheat on his wife. But if he does, it's more forgivable because he is financially independent. Progeny is another reason for a woman not to commit adultery. Unlike a man, a woman who



commits adultery brings to her husband concealed illegitimate birth. For these reasons, women will never equal men in this sin, unless they earn as much and unless science in the future can help husbands sort their legitimate children from illegitimate with a high degree of accuracy. Until then, however, don't talk about equality in adultery."

"If this happens in the future, there will be no need for marriage anyway!"

"And there will be no pleasure for women to commit adultery because there will be no husbands for them to victimize."

"How cynical of you," she said with a soft laughter and taking liberty with him for the first time.

But he didn't notice. He only noticed that time had gone by quickly without any progress. So he looked for the pen and paper and gave them to her saying seriously, "Hurry up and write! We've had more than our share of frank talk."

She didn't bother looking at the pen or paper. She looked at him instead saying, "On the contrary! I'm happy that we're frank with each other. I feel great relief when conversing with you without formality."

"I will feel the same if you write!"

"Write what? Do you really think I'm an adulterous woman?"

He became impatient but was able to hide it, "Who told you that? I'm not in a position to judge you. My duty is to ask you to meet your husband's irreversible demands. By the way, if you still have some trust in me, you should know that, based on what I've seen of your husband, it will impossible for both of you to be husband and wife again."

She reflected for a moment on what he had said, then said in a tone of sincerity, “But . . . but I don’t hate my husband. In spite of everything, I have nothing but respect, appreciation, and affection for him.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

“My husband and you have a way of looking at what I’ve done as if it were a great tragedy. I believe, however, that it’s nothing but some harmless emotions I recklessly wrote down and misfortune made them fall into my husband’s hand. This is not the first time a wife commits some kind of madness, you know! One of my married girlfriends is hooked on gambling to the extent that she has forgotten all about her home, husband, and children. She is bent on the play table day and night, playing poker and spending her money, including the money generated from the sale of her household silverware. Her husband views the situation with great agitation, but he never thought of divorcing her or separating from her. Maybe he even sympathizes with her after realizing that gambling is stronger than her will. Perhaps he has already forgiven her or perhaps he will someday. This is what every husband ought to do. Suppose I have made a mistake, am I not allowed to repent someday? Don’t you remember Thaïs? I had read in the book you’d given me that Thaïs, who had spent most of her life as a whore, was raised to the rank of a saint and forgiven by God. Don’t I deserve a second chance like her? Please answer and don’t be harsh on me.”

He looked at her, thinking of words to say.

“Thaïs had neither a husband nor a child. Rest assured that your husband, in spite of everything, still respects you as the woman he had once trusted and loved dearly. I can swear to you that he never referred to you in his conversation with me except as “this

lady,” and never attributed any lowly characteristics to you, even when he was most angry and furious. He is a polite man in the full sense of the word and a perfect husband. As the father of your child, he believes that it is his duty to raise his daughter on different principles from yours. I think that is his right or rather his sacred duty towards her. Based on all of that, you see that you, as a married woman, cannot compare yourself to Thaïs, the free woman.”

She looked down for a moment then jerked her head up, causing her beautiful hair to be scattered, and said, “What you’ve said is awful. Even my repentance you and my husband won’t accept! But, let me tell you, I have held you responsible since day one.”

He opened his mouth, “Responsible for what?”

“When I came here a year ago, it wasn’t because of books or literature. It was because I had a psychological disorder. I was married for two years then and was beginning to experience some disappointment and coldness in marriage. Before marriage, I was energetic and very curious about anything new. I hated the idea of doing things uniformly like when conversing with people, making friends, feeling for someone, or even loving someone. To me, life meant motion and stillness meant death. Life meant keeping my feelings and body in motion. Marriage, on the contrary, is dullness and stillness in the image of a cold relationship between two lovers turned into two cold friends. This explains why many women who enjoy good marriages in the eyes of the others who envy them have been secretly searching for a companion, a lover, or even a mere friend only to be near a man other than the husband. A husband no longer reveals manhood to us; he only invites our respect, affection, and compassion. He is like a brother or a dear cousin, but not the man who can arouse curiosity or trigger those

ambiguous and delicious feelings in us or arouse our instinct to look beautiful and capture his heart. This was exactly my feeling after a year of marriage. By then, I had heard of you from my husband who spoke highly of your writings that I thought to meet with you. And I did. But alas! you didn't open your heart or soul to me or help me in my emotional stress. Instead, you left me to tempests and storms! You didn't understand me at all! You didn't want to."

His heart jumped. He looked down so that she wouldn't notice the change in his face. When he regained control, he reached for the pen and paper, "Forgive me, Madame. There are many things I will never understand until I die. Now, if you please . . ."

She looked at the pen and paper while he pushed them towards her and said, after some hesitation, "I haven't lost all hope yet."

She got up to leave, but he anxiously asked, "What are you going to do next?"

"I won't tell you now. But I will come back to tell you if my last weapon fails me," she answered with a vague smile.

She walked out before he had a chance to comment.

### **The Fight**

A day passed, and he sat waiting, unaware of what to do. She had put him in an awkward position. But his wait was cut short by a phone call around noon from the husband who spoke in an angry voice and who informed him that the wife knew where he lodged in Helwan and went to see him. The husband received his crying wife as he would receive a stranger and politely seated her in the hotel lobby. He did his best to avoid getting into any discussion with her. She wasn't even sure if he took notice of her tears at all or cared about her presence or the reason for which she went to see him.

He took leave of her, less than a minute of her arrival, with the excuse that he had to go somewhere. But he left the hotel altogether, promising himself to never come back except to pick up his suitcase and move into a new place, the whereabouts of which would remain unknown until everything was settled between them.

The husband urged his friend to use all means to speed up the process and to arrive at a peaceful solution, before he would run out of patience and take her to court with all the unpredictable and negative consequences that go with such a move. Their phone conversation ended on that point. The Monk-Philosopher weighed the options before him while putting the phone down: either to call her or wait for her to come on her own, as she had promised.

He preferred to wait and had no doubt she would come. He thought that if she came on her own, she would suggest ways of putting an end to this ordeal instead of listening as usual to her husband's demands. He only hoped that she would come sooner and guessed that she would, especially after that swift and cold reception by her husband.

He was right. As soon as the night fell she came to see him. But she didn't look like a woman whose heart was broken. Instead, she looked bright and attractive, like a ray of light in the middle of darkness. She wore a silk dress showing the beautiful details of her body. Her perfume preceded her into the room as if ushering her beauty in. How powerful perfumes are, he reflected. They are women's timeless weapon in a chemical warfare launched to capture men's hearts.

She did not sit in her usual seat but drew near his desk instead saying, "Where is the pen and paper?"

He couldn't hide his pleasure, "Oh, are you ready to sign?"

"Yes, are you surprised that I've given up that quickly?"

"Your last weapon has failed you, then?"

"You were right. It's impossible for us to be husband and wife again."

"You saw for yourself, didn't you?"

"How did you know? Of course he told you that I went to see him!"

"Yes, he told me—everything."

"Yes, I see no use in trying. Today, I realized that I was seeing a man different from my husband the first moment I saw him. I felt that everything between us has come to a conclusion, and that it was better to turn over that page of our life peacefully. My husband is really a polite man. I doubt that you've ever heard me complain about him in

this respect. I realized today that he would have been more hurt and wounded had he discussed the subject with me. All what he wants really is to stay away from me, quietly. The least I can do then is to grant his wish and submit to his demands. As for my daughter, I'm sure he will not object to my seeing her whenever I want, because the idea of torturing me does not cross the minds of people like him. So be it, and let each of us go his and her separate way. Tell me what I should write.”

He dictated the husband's demands to her and she wrote them down and signed the document, which he took, folded, and kept in one of his folders. She settled in her seat, lighted a cigarette, and said with a smile: “Free at last!”

“Of course.”

“I can meet whomever I want tonight, and, as you can see, I look my best because I'm going to an evening party that may end up very pleasurable indeed.”

“Enjoy every minute of it, Madame,” he said in a vague tone that could be interpreted as courtesy, sarcasm, or anger.

She slowly raised her eyelashes and looked at him, as though trying to interpret his last sentence. But she couldn't, for he looked down, pretending to arrange some papers on his desk. She continued, “Indeed, how beautiful freedom is. I would have been a crazy move on my part to cling to a marriage like that. Why don't I try my luck one more time? I'm still young and not that ugly, I suppose. Can't you see that?”

He raised his head, “See what?”

“See if I'm ugly or beautiful,” she replied quickly and boldly.

“Hasn't anyone already told you about that?” he inquired without looking at her.

“Everybody except you.”

“I imagine I’ve already delivered some opinions about you,” he said while fumbling with some paper.

“Yes, about my madness, ignorance, recklessness, and bad judgment!”

“They are opinions nonetheless!”

“They are. But you’ve never told me I’m beautiful, not even once.”

“My opinion in this doesn’t count much.”

“It does with me.”

“I thank you for your exaggerated appreciation of my opinions.”

She blew smoke out of her mouth angrily and said, “May God preserve me from you! You’re awful . . . awful! Do you suppose any woman can put up with you? Can you believe you’re the only man I’ve run into who has neither discussed love with me nor told me that he loved me? Sometimes I feel like I’m going to explode with rage because you keep insulting and wounding me and my pride. I wish to see the day when I get even with you. Why don’t you love and admire me? Why are you the only man treating me like that? What don’t you like about my looks and body? I have been asking myself these questions and hoping to win some answers from you.”

Looking down, he began to sketch meaningless shapes with his pen on a piece of paper. Perhaps he did so to conceal the sudden passion that passed through his heart like a breeze.

“You shouldn’t have thought about such silly things,” he said, still looking down.

“I don’t believe you! You treat me strangely! It makes me wonder how you call my interest in you silliness. I have no doubt that you despise me. I know that and don’t want to argue it. But it ought to make you happy that I feel this way for you, unless you’re



afraid of me and think that I have another purpose in mind— especially in my present circumstances. I suppose you have every right to suspect me so, for everything seems to validate your suspicion. But trust me, I have no purpose in mind except to make you aware of what goes through my mind. Indeed, it is tyrannical if we cannot confide in one another, particularly after you've entered into my private life in such a manner. Forget then that I have another purpose in mind. I've never thought of marrying you! And I know you haven't either. Isn't that true? Haven't I told the truth? Speak to me."

"Marrying you is an honor I do not deserve."

"Oh, quit your cruel sarcasm! Why aren't you cheerful and serene with me, especially after I've given in and willingly signed the paper for you? Do you intend to follow the example of my husband and sever your relationship with me? If you do, then you would lose your neutrality. Tell me frankly: what are you going to do with me?"

"Rest assured that I will forever remain neutral."

"Then talk to me in the same friendly tone you undoubtedly use with my husband."

"There is no reason for me not to be friendly with you."

She resented hearing such a dry answer but resumed in a more moderate tone, "Let's talk as friends, then. I will unearth all my hidden sentiments for you. Do you know what kind of a husband I've always dreamed of? One who is not of your kind or my husband's. The modern woman can only find happiness with a husband who lacks both character and intelligence. I've come to realize this fact by counting the number of happy wives among my friends whose husbands are of this type. My biggest mistake was that I picked the wrong type! Wouldn't you agree with me?"

"I would."

“What about you? Can I ask you about your type of woman?”

“One who lacks both character and intelligence!”

She laughed heartily that the sparkle of her teeth almost lit the dim room, for the only source of light was the electric lamp on his desk. She gave him a look full of her irresistible charm and proceeded, “And of a backward upbringing?”

“Like me.”

“What about her looks? Pretty?”

“Like you,” he said in a tone indicative of neither sarcasm nor seriousness.

She wanted to find out what exactly he meant.

“I would’ve considered what you’ve just said to be your first confession that I’m pretty had I not been sure you were being sarcastic.”

“What difference does my confession make to you?”

“It would be a great victory for me. I can claim that I’ve won your admiration in something,” she replied in a joyful and sweet tone.

“Don’t exaggerate, Madame.”

“Madame! You always call me that, even after our long acquaintance and relationship. When will you start calling me ‘My friend?’”

“My friend?” he said coldly, but the echo of his words found a warm place in his heart and mind. He recalled using the same phrase in his letters to her and reading it in her Notebook. He wondered how that phrase had lived two different lives, one in his world and another in hers. He shook his head, ridiculing the phrase, himself, and the beautiful woman sitting right by him. Then he fell silent. She waited for him to say

something, but he didn't. She broke the silence with her soft voice, "Is it too much to ask for your friendship, stingy? I've always expected more than that."

"What have you expected?"

"To be to you what *Thaïs* was to Paphnutius."

"*Thaïs*?"

"I suppose you haven't forgotten that *Thaïs* was the book you had given me on my first visit to you. Trust me, I read it carefully, word by word, and came to realize how she captured the monk's heart, made him rid himself of his religious attire, and leave his mountain cell and follow her like a lunatic. She did all that, but look at what I have done! I have been asking myself, 'Why you made me read that particular book?'"

Her sharp look forced him to look down. But her remarks didn't come as a complete surprise to him, for he had detected some hints earlier aiming at the same end. His face remained unchanged, and he was in control of himself.

"I made you read it so that you would learn a lesson from what happened to *Thaïs* at the end."

"I've learned a lesson from what happened to her at the beginning," she said with a soft laughter.

"I'm not responsible for your choice, then."

"You wanted me to hate the book's cheerful beginning and to like its dark end?"

"Its end was not dark; it was luminous with the light of virtue. It's true that her body was covered with filth but her soul was pure and high above, like a white flower rising with its stem above the dirt."

“I don’t understand how you find excuses for her, even though most readers view her as a whore.”

“That’s no matter. People can see only her vice and misconduct, but God sees her virtue and chastity. Conversely, the virtue and chastity of a proper lady can be seen by people, but her vice and misconduct can only be seen by God. Because Thaïs was pure before God, she was miraculously transformed from a whore to a saint and the gates of heavens opened for her.”

“But Paphnutius loved Thaïs the woman, not the saint.”

“ Yes, unfortunately.”

“All men do that!”

“That’s true. But that particular monk deserved to be cursed. He lost his long-anticipated place in heaven because of her.”

“I see you’re learning a good lesson from what happened to him at the end.”

“He did the right thing.”

“No he did not,” she challenged him.

He shrugged his shoulders, “This is your opinion. I should have expected it.”

“You should’ve expected me to give you some advice and to tell you frankly that only losers reject love when it comes to them. The days of saints are gone. Come out with me now to see the modern society and to get acquainted with the era we live in. It comes as a surprise to me to see a man of intelligence living still with the ghost of old ideas and the superstition of old books.”

“I chose to live with an everlasting thing. Ideas do not die.”

She laughed, “Nothing dies as quickly as ideas. Every generation has its ideas just like every era has its own fashion. Ideas are like leaves: they fall every autumn. Ideas from a thousand, a hundred, or even fifty years ago are non-existent today. But a kiss is a kiss throughout the ages! It has never lost its warmth for thousands of years, since the creation of humans. Embrace has not changed either: it has continued to release the same sensation inside the body and soul over the generations.”

“Are you comparing books and ideas to kisses and embraces? How proper!”

“Which do you suppose will win in this comparison?” She asked with a sweet smile.

“This comparison is absolutely inappropriate.”

“For the simple reason that you don’t know what a kiss is.”

“Have I missed out on a great thing?”

“You’ve missed everything.”

“What a great calamity!” he said sarcastically.

“It is indeed a great calamity. I was like you until a short time ago. I thought that a kiss—placing lips on lips—was a symbol of love and loyalty. But it turned out it was not. It is a lively substance in and out of itself, devoid of any meaning or symbol. Nothing aborts the vitality of a substance like throwing meanings and symbols on it and causing it to suffocate underneath them. A substance is because of the warmth emanating from within itself not because of the meaning we attach to it. Your real calamity, believe me, is that you view the kiss through the lens of a particular meaning. I used to view it this way when I was married. But when I found the man who was able to take that lens away, I felt as if a curtain was lifted before me, showing unimaginable worlds of great sensation and pleasure. Our imagination is incapable of attaching words and meaning to

our physical sensations. Perhaps this explains why I wrote my Notebook. Although I admit that my behavior was reckless, I remember then that I couldn't resist my desire to write down my newly awakened feelings in their initial stage. Describing them on paper made me relive them. I wanted to relive and relive them. Trust me, friend, that the whole world with its ideas, virtues, vices, faiths, high ideals, and vanity can easily melt in the heat of a real kiss."

She uttered those words while her damp lips shook like a twin cherry on a tree being shaken by breeze. He stole a glance at her, quickly viewing her beauty and examining those cherries and imagining the juice they would contain. Then he surveyed her soft and tender body and contemplated the impact of touching it.

He began to realize the truth in her words and that up to now he had never thought of her body except as a wall on which he hung pictures invented by his imagination and meanings created in his mind. As for the wall itself, he never touched or knew what was behind it. What she said was right, then, he thought. Our minds secrete meanings to wrap things with and prevent us, in spite of ourselves, from realizing their truth. The continuous tension between oppositions such as the literal and abstract and the body and the soul—each is trying to block the other—causes us to see only the pale shadows of things. We must not entrust any of the opposites to dominate and interpret the other. Nothing can interpret an opposite except itself. Thus the body can best interpret the body and the soul can best interpret the soul. Bodies and lips must meet, therefore, to produce that firebrand inexpressible and unimaginable by abstract thought.

He realized that she was right and that he had overstated the role of intellect. It was as if he was looking at the truth with one eye—the intellect. Why did he choose to shut

the other eye? And why didn't he make use of the body as he did with intellect to obtain knowledge? It was beyond his comprehension. It was probably because he was as moderate in his sexual relations as in his food and drink. Physical sensations, sexual and otherwise, were meant primarily to serve his mind. It never crossed his mind to indulge himself in a delicacy and enjoy its taste and feel its contents touching and going down his throat. He missed out on that pleasurable feeling: when the stomach is relieved after fullness with food and the belly is happy with that light and gentle pressure against its tender walls. He didn't realize then that every part and organ of his body is a lively separate creature, with its own happiness which cannot be expressed by his imagination. Just like our teeth become stronger every time we bite, every part of the body becomes happier with any touch or embrace. Even our fingers freshen up when touching a beautiful and tender body.

But the Monk-Philosopher had not given his fingers any pleasure except touching his books and pulling them out from the bookcase in the darkness of the night. Every part of his body was exploited to serve his mind—that quack magician who offers nothing to the exploited organs of the body except the fabrication of bogus pleasures. He looked at his fingers with pity, as though he wanted to say, “Be patient with the deception of this magician,” and imagined them asking, “Until when are we going to be enslaved? We want to touch things other than books!”

Signs of rebellion began to show slowly all over his body. He envisioned the moment when every hair in his body would stand up screaming, “Down with intellect,” and doubted his ability to resist the pressure, for if monk Paphnutius had failed to use his deep-rooted faith to resist temptation could he succeed with intellect being his weapon?

Intellect as an instrument of defense is not as strong as faith because faith is absolute—open for neither suspicion nor argument. Suspicion, on the other hand, is the window of intellect, refreshing its blood with the air of argument. Paphnutius’s faith in God shielded him and fought back until the last moment. But the Monk-Philosopher’s intellect was ready to raise the white flag and negotiate with his rebellious body right from the start. Intellect may even take the lead and plead the cause of the bodily rebellion. That would be all right, the Monk-Philosopher thought, but who could anticipate the outcome of such a rebellion? Maybe its fire will burn everything, including its leaders. Maybe it is nature’s punishment of every tyranny, be it intellect or faith. Nothing can stop the body from rebelling, even its old magician and great master—the mind. That bodily revolution will run down everything in its path, including the mind even if it waves the white flag. The Monk-Philosopher continued to envision such a revolution and to live its events, forgetting that the very thing (the mind) he was criticizing and suspecting was still his source of thought.

She continued to stare at him in silence and realized, with her feminine instinct, what was going through his mind. Her reading of his face indicated an uncertain intellectual, not a disdainful monk. He was, more than ever, ready to surrender.

“I don’t know what kind of woman you encountered in your life, for you haven’t told me yet. But I can assure you that you haven’t run across one who could capture you—body and mind—with her body.”

He regarded her with a look which encouraged her to go on “One who can cover you with her kisses and make you feel that every atom of your body has drunk its fill.”



He said nothing; she went on “One who is hungry and willing to swallow you, flesh and bones. I can picture you now with such a woman who knows how to incite the kind of wolf’s hunger in you. I can imagine your teeth pressing against her tender flesh. You’ll be frightening and wonderful at the same time. I’m sure of that. I know it as if it has just happened before my eyes.”

He stuck to his silence. She didn’t need his words, for his face said it all. He was like a big ship but with its engine stalled being dragged into the harbor by a small boat. She was that boat, and he was slowly entering the harbor of her influence. She gave him a victorious, seductive, and joyful smile. She knew then that she had succeeded in bringing him gradually to her turf, where her feminine instincts would defeat him. The situation was different when she had gone to his field, where he was able to employ logic and intellect and quickly defeat her.

She laughed softly and began a trivial discussion with him. Then she pulled up her dress, effortlessly and without affectation or premeditation and exposed her legs as she regarded him with a sleepy look coming through her long eyelashes. She sensed the blood rushing to his head. He was blockaded, intellect and all, and she was becoming the one in charge.

Then she got up, like a slim and nimble gazelle, and looked at her tiny watch, saying, “Oh, I’m late for my date.” Then she extended her soft and tender hand to take leave of him. She pressed his hand; he didn’t let go of hers.

“Date?” he said as if just awakened from a slumber.

“Haven’t I told you when I first came that I was going out to spend an exciting evening?” she said, smiling and regarding him with that irresistible look of hers.

“With a man?”

“Of course, who else?” she replied with a gentle, brief smile.

He let go of her hand and pretended not to care, “Go to him, then.”

“Are you hurt?” she asked compassionately.

“It’s your life. You said you wanted to be set free and do whatever you like. Go ahead then and do what you like. Throw yourself in the bosom of every man and be in any man’s arms. Go ahead . . . Go ahead!”

She gazed at him then said, in a coquettish tone, “I see you’re getting jealous!”

“Me?”

“I’m not a child, you know. I know a jealous person when I see one.”

“Go away! I don’t want to see you. Everything between us is over now, and you’re left with no reason to be here. Go to your date and excitement.”

“I’m going. But don’t you wish to know who my date is?”

“Not necessarily.”

“You know him!”

“I don’t care.”

“He is a very nice man. Can I tell you his name?”

“No.”

“I will!”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“I’ll write it down then. Give me a piece of paper and pen.”

She didn’t wait for him. She quickly moved closer to his seat and dug up a blank piece of paper out of the scattered papers on his desk. She picked a pen and sat with one

thigh on the arm of his chair. Her body stuck with his and tufts of her hair rolled down on his face as she bent to write down the name. When she moved, he felt her breast rubbing against his cheek and slightly bent gently and nicely as a result, like a rubber ball when pressed by a finger. Her smell—a mixture of her body's scent and perfume—filled his nostrils. Sometimes the smell of a woman's sweat and breath far exceeds any perfumes in seducing men. That smell is as natural as that of flowers. Only nature, not manufacturers of perfume, knows its secret.

He was confused and unable to tell his head from toe. He lost control of himself and couldn't even discern the meaning of her flirty words. But his ears were intoxicated with the sweetness of her voice. His eyes overlooked what she had written on paper and only devoured her soft and tender hand. He was no longer the man of thought he had been; he was a body without mind.

It was a calm and beautiful night. The weak light coming from the desk lamp cast its soft rays on her beautiful face, scattered hair, neck, and chest—all seemed to move and shift in the interplay of light and shadow. He looked calm on the outside but shook like a boiling pot from within. He was like a bomb, about to explode. All he knew was that he still had an area of resistance somewhere inside him, working to postpone the moment at which his arms would embrace that woman so that he could cover her with his violent kisses. She sensed and understood what he was going through, like a seabird instinctively anticipating the coming of a tempest.

She sensed how fragile he was, like a sandcastle awaiting another touch from her to collapse. She didn't hesitate and tilted her body towards him, until her soft breast almost reached his mouth like a ripe fruit. She brought her head closer to his and inflamed his

face with her warm breath. Then she whispered in his ear, like spring breeze, as she drew his attention to what she wrote on the paper: “The darling I’m dating tonight is you.”

His hand was, in spite of himself, already searching for her thigh and his lips were searching for hers.

The phone in the room rang, sounding like thunder. They jumped and were separated. He hurried to answer it. It was the husband’s trembling voice: “Immortality be only to God. My cousin passed away today. He was killed by a reckless bullet from his gun while cleaning it. I’m in Helwan at the Grand Hotel to receive his body and arrange for his funeral.”

After he put down the phone, the Monk-Philosopher began to regain his consciousness and, in the process, forgot all about the woman in the room. He became only preoccupied with the husband and his dead cousin. He saw that it was his duty to head immediately for Helwan to be by the husband’s side and to offer him support. Maybe the husband meant to have him by his side when he decided to call him. He looked at the small clock in his office. It was ten-thirty. He walked quickly to his inner room to get dressed and go out. She gave him an inquiring look to which he quickly said in a hoarse voice, “Your husband’s cousin got killed.”

“Got killed?”

He paid no attention to her. He headed for the room as he gestured to her with his hand and said, “I’ll be leaving shortly. Goodbye Madame.”

She knew then that there was no use of staying. He left her and went on his way whispering to himself: “The man died. Damn women! . . . Damn women!”

### The End

The next morning the military funeral procession of the husband's cousin moved along the street heading for the graveyard. The coffin, wrapped in the green flag, was placed on top of a cannon carriage. Members of the deceased's military division marched on both sides of the street with their guns at half-mast. The echoes of their steps on the pavement made a systematic, balanced sound in the dreadful silence. From time to time, military taps broke the silence playing Chopin's sad tune. Taps then became silent to give way to the beats of drums, which filled the souls of the mourners with a kind of gloomy charm and plunged the entire procession in a majestic atmosphere.

The Monk-Philosopher was among the mourners, walking in one of the rows with his head down. Many thoughts preyed on his mind. Undoubtedly, people around him believed that the deceased had died naturally, for they knew nothing about the inside story. But the Monk-Philosopher was almost positive that he shot himself with his own gun. Such a thought first crossed his mind when the husband announced the cousin's death the day before, although the husband never said outright that the man had committed suicide. He only told the Monk-Philosopher that when he came back to the hotel the day before to pick up his stuff and to tell his cousin about what he had planned to do with his wife, he found him examining his pistol. The husband became frightened at that scene and began to suspect, but his cousin reassured him that he was entertaining

himself by cleaning his pistol because it was easier than cleaning his stained honor. The cousin looked calm then and even made a few jokes for the first time since his ordeal. All this left no room for the husband to suspect anything. But no sooner had the husband gone to his room to pack his suitcase than he heard a gunshot echoing through the hotel. His suspicions surfaced again and made him run to his cousin's room only to find him dead.

When informing the Monk-Philosopher, the husband drew no conclusion as to the cause of his cousin's death. But he concluded with a certain look from which the Monk-Philosopher was certain that the husband, like himself, knew that that miserable creature had committed suicide and that he wished no one to know. Whether this was the truth or not, the husband employed his usual wisdom and discretion to hide any suspicion of foul play surrounding that family tragedy and any connection between the death of his cousin and that man's wife and children. Perhaps the husband understood that his cousin decided to withdraw peacefully from life when he had felt that he was unable to cope with his suspicions and was about to ruin his family and stain the name of his innocent child, whom he suspected to be not his. He had preferred to be the victim instead of victimizing others. If that was the case, the least the husband could do was to honor his wish by pulling a thick curtain down on all the events and motives leading to his death.

The Monk-Philosopher raised his head and looked at the coffin in front of him. Then he began to reflect, "God! How important that sacred bond is to a man! I mean the bond between a man and his child. Blood is the source of sacredness between the two—pure blood, that is. It's difficult for a man to endure the staining of such pure blood or even suspect it. The situation is different for a woman, however, for every child coming out of

her belly is hers, regardless of who the father is. This is why a woman rarely comprehends the true sacredness of that bond. A woman hallows nothing that may collide with her instinct or stand in the way of her lust.”

Then the events of the previous night came to his mind. He felt shame and wondered how she made him forget all about the most basic morals and principles in a single moment. How could he have met her husband face to face had he committed a sin with her? What would her husband, who respected and entrusted him with his secrets and appointed him to negotiate on his behalf, say had he known that the man he had trusted had fallen into his wife’s bosom and played the same role as that of the actor described in her Notebook? Besides, how could he feel for and be ready to embrace a woman he had scorned and meant to discard as unworthy of his love and respect?

The fact is that his feeling for her the night before was different from his previous lofty love of her. His new feeling was impure—the kind often associated with scorn. It was the wrong kind of love, like flowers growing in swamps. But how did it happen? Undoubtedly, she was the one responsible for manufacturing that sort of love, just as he was responsible for his first love of her.

That sort of physical love is what women like herself would like to promote today, he thought. Since the early days, women have depended on their attraction to transmit signals to men. They have known perfume and studied the effect of its scent on men’s senses since the dawn of history. Glances, smiles, and sighs are some of their distance techniques to cause men to lose their minds. Poets have always tried to intercept these signals and interpret them with a touch of sublimity, but that has not swayed women a bit from their original goal.

Hundreds of years ago, the Moslem caliph Sultan al-Din had successfully used the pulpit to install morality in women. Men of religion then had addressed women's hearts and minds, convincing them sometimes and threatening them other times. But that experiment had impacted women because they had mainly stayed home and never uttered the word "freedom". A woman then didn't go to nightclubs or big parties. Her signals of seduction were transmitted only within her home, or some neighboring homes at the most. Besides, religion was dominant in every home and was able to intercept such signals.

Today, the modern woman has left religion at home, echoing in its corners as it pleases, and rushed to the streets, shops, cafés, and nightclubs spreading her perfume, smiles, and glances. She has become a walking transmitter, sending irresistible signals to every passerby.

Today, religion has become weak and ineffective in deterring feminist movement and words of morality descend on woman's heart and mind as cold as sunrays at sunset. There must be some substitute for religion to redirect woman's life towards sublimity. Although windows of freedom have been widely opened for her, there is no hope that the light they bring will illuminate her soul or leave an impact on her, unless that light is coming from within—her inner light, that is. That inner light must be in accordance with both her instincts and nature. But in order for that light to guide her, she must perceive it as a kind of beauty. For ever since her creation, woman has had one deep sentiment stronger than religion, chastity, or virtue: it is her consistent desire to be beautiful. This explains why mirrors were invented before glass. There will be no problem then if the woman realizes that her inner light can enhance her beauty in a way facial powder and



jewelry can't. A woman ornamented with jewelry is like a lamp made of pure gold. But where is the light? Light is an abstract thing; it isn't the flames or sparks. It is that pure and calm radiance which burns and harms no one. It is that thing which, although immaterial, fills the soul with pure pleasure. It is that secret which can be deposited in women as it is in flowers, illuminating them with colors revered and worshiped by distant beholders and protecting them from the absurdity of the mere cheap and materialistic use.

If a woman is careful to possess that inner light, she can turn herself into a creature of great blessing. She can now send waves of lofty light to illuminate the hearts and signals of sublime ideas to inspire the souls.

But there is a problem: who can pave the road for her to do just that? As perfume, jewelry, and powder makers help her to be materialistically radioactive, there must be other specialists as well who can help her use other tools with which she can be spiritually radioactive.

This is the mission of people of intellect, the Monk-Philosopher thought. He recalled his words when she first visited him that "He wanted to recreate that woman and to transform her into a bride running in joy with her long flowing hair and lighted spirit in the spacious and flowery pastures of intellect. He wanted to turn her into a queen, like those recorded in history who knew how to touch men's souls with the scepter of their spirit as they touched their eyes with the makeup pencil. Men then would see like they've never seen before and their souls would become energized as a result, causing genius to bear fruit, determination to rise, all good things to be plentiful, and things and beings to pulse with life." He further recalled his wish for her to have "a spirit lighting her crystal inner self. Only then can she utter lofty words and express sublime ideas."

What happened then? he wondered. It dawned on him that he failed with her just as Paphnutius had failed with Thaïs because the two men had a lot in common: they both trusted woman more than they should and filled their minds with confused dreams about her.

The Monk-Philosopher was absorbed in his thoughts until the funeral procession stopped in front of a mosque. The body was taken into the mosque for a prayer. Then the family and relatives of the deceased stood aside to receive consolations from people who came to pay him their last honors. Most people left afterwards except for family members and close relatives who accompanied the body to its final destination. Of course, the Monk-Philosopher was among them. He was there when the body was lowered after it had received a twenty-one gun salute, performed by soldiers of the deceased's military division. Diggers began to lay the dust over the coffin, and readers of the Koran began teaching the deceased what to say to angels on his first encounter with them. They yelled, "O servant of God, this is your last day here and your first in the hereafter."

The Monk-Philosopher thought about that last statement and looked to see its effect on the gloomy and submissive faces around him. He had no doubt that they all had realized its painful truth: Life is a lot shorter when compared to the afterlife. But the truth he realized was even more painful: the life of the body is by far shorter than that of the soul. He began to reflect on the life of the deceased: "How long had the body of that man lived? Thirty-eight years? But his soul will live forever. That young body will dissolve and mingle with dust. Not an atom or a cell of it will be able after today to rise against the soul or to demand bodily pleasure of it. What a stunning victory for the soul!

Bodily cells were right then to rebel when they were strong and vigorous. They must have anticipated their dreadful fate and carefully counted their years in power and realized their short. For what, then, did the soul compete and envy those bodily cells? For a few scores of years! say sixty, eighty, or even a hundred? Why didn't the soul of that man let his body enjoy those few years, knowing that eternity was ahead of it? Why this battle between the two on that trivial battlefield—that fragile and short-lived human body? Why is that struggle between the two, given the non-threatening nature of the body? Why wouldn't the soul let the body live these limited years in peace?"

The Monk-Philosopher had no idea what called out all these questions in him. Perhaps his subdued senses rose in rebellion after being frightened by the burial scene. Indeed he found himself thinking about the wife once again and wondering what kept him away from her. He began to criticize himself for his bogus strictness and godliness when dealing with her and for not having her as his mistress, especially that she was willing. Undoubtedly, he thought, someone else would win her if he didn't. Besides, nothing would prick his conscience because she was the one seducing him, not the other way around. As for her husband, he wouldn't care about her anymore for she was now a divorced and free woman as far as society was concerned. Thus a renewed relationship between the two could be maintained without prejudice to the husband's pride or rights. Besides, who would tell the husband anyway? His future relationship with the wife, he contemplated, would be surrounded with walls of secrecy that couldn't be built if she was to go with another man, and he would be more careful about her reputation and her husband's than any other man. He was sure that if the husband were to pick a man for her, he would have chosen him.

Those were the thoughts crossing the Monk-Philosopher's mind, and he was yet to leave the graveyard! He came to his senses when he suddenly glimpsed the poor husband near him and saw the luster of a tear on his cheek. Then he looked to his right and left and imagined everyone piercing his skull with their looks and penetrating his thoughts. And what thoughts they were! Undoubtedly, people would wonder how anyone could have such thoughts in a graveyard. Fortunately, skulls are made thick enough to prevent lookers from reading one's thoughts. But even with the husband's approval of his relationship with the wife, the Monk-Philosopher thought, his repulsive action couldn't be defended or justified.

For in addition to physical pleasure there is moral pleasure. If we only listen to the cries of our senses and merit their demands, we will be no different from animals. There are many pleasures unknown to our senses: sacrifice and self-denial—to name just two. A life without moral values is meaningless and a trivial one. Or else, what is the difference between the Monk-Philosopher and a bull running in a field? Indeed, the soul in our short-lived life is not the source of our misery, as the body claims, but the source of a different kind of happiness. If a woman would believe that curbing her physical senses would grant her enough moral happiness to compensate for her lost bodily pleasures, she would never make light of the sacred bond. The Monk-Philosopher understood that, for he was a man of moral beauty who saw things through moral light. He would not make light of a sacred bond which bound him to moral values.

The husband approached him and took him silently by the arm. They both walked out of the cemetery. The funeral ceremony was over, and people began to leave. The husband offered him a ride, during which time the husband hinted at the situation with his

wife. The Monk-Philosopher removed the signed paper from his pocket and gave it to the husband who examined it and put it in his. Then the husband shook hands with him, pressing his hand as a sign of appreciation for his good deed. At that moment, the wife's image surfaced in the Monk-Philosopher's mind and frightened him with her seduction. He feared giving in to the evil of her charm and temptations.

Accordingly, he decided that the best thing for him was to leave Cairo for a while, for just enough time to bury all previous events under the dust of forgetfulness and to allow all parties to start anew.

The car pulled over where the Monk-Philosopher was to get off. He extended his hand to his friend saying, "I'm going away tomorrow morning to spend two or three months in the countryside."

\* \* \*

The Monk-Philosopher returned after a few months to Cairo, serene and satisfied. Upon his arrival, his servant confirmed to him what he had anticipated before leaving: she came to visit him twice during the first two weeks of his departure but, trusting his absence would be prolonged, she never returned. He sat at his desk and resumed work, forgetting about her entirely. As for the husband, he didn't want to annoy him by being the one to call first. Perhaps he had forgotten him, or wished to forget all about him and about the whole affair. Anyhow, it wasn't the husband who would bring back the painful memories, he thought.

After a period of time, he ran across a picture of her making headlines in some magazine. She was now married to a man, notable for his triviality and stupidity. Only then did he realize that she had finally won the ideal husband for the modern woman.

As for him, he went back to his morning habit, calmly and cheerfully opening the letters of his readers. Shortly, he encountered a letter which made his body quiver. It was from a woman asking to see him to discuss some matters of literature and intellect.

“No . . . No . . . Enough! I’ve come to know their tricks by now,” he shrieked.

His fingers pressed against the letter, about to tear it up. But soon he regained his senses saying, “Courage is not in avoiding the pitfalls of the body but in confronting them with the light of truth and high ideals.”

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