

COLLECTION
LABICHE

Robert Schinas

RUE ATTARINE



Calmann-Lévy

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PREFACE

It jumps to your eyes and you will discover that the author did not want to write a book. It would also be wrong to speak of dialogues or script or comedy.

What you are about to read is a joke which swells to gigantic proportions because of its simplicity. Such a conclusion evidently applies to the characters, feelings, situations and even the transcription can be approved or criticized.

Yes, Robert SCHINASI has written this book as the characters live it, in total frankness and simplicity.

In a more serious book, when a Julien SOREL or a César BIROTTEAU want to obtain information, they ask for it, then renew their question, make a third attempt, continue their investigation, questioning, questioning again, consulting, challenging, which implies a change of attitude which ABOU ZEID, ALY MANSOUR and all his friends are unable to follow.

Our heroes are made in one block with one single idea in their mind. For this reason, when they want to know, they ask and ask again which conveys to them a naive and stubborn side. You cannot admit that this makes their charm and such a conclusion would seem displaced.

As a matter of fact, nothing is charming in this picturesque, turbulent, exuberant Attarine Street where all is cunningness, enthusiasm and noise. All is also authentic and this authenticity can be discovered in each page, each sentence and even in each word as very few sentences are to be found.

All this is related to us without the author troubling to describe the state of mind of his heroes or devoting himself to some psychoanalysis. No description of surroundings or even clothing is offered to us.

Robert SCHINASI cannot find time for such description being unceasingly obliged to watch the furtive hands of Uncle MOHAMMED or the exerted eyes of MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

The author will not tell you if the Abdallah coffee is painted in red or if MUSTAPHA wears a turban or a chechia and you would be too busy to read such descriptions, occupied by the discussions of the heroes sitting in front of their mint tea.

And you will learn among other things that MUSTAPHA is a monkey exhibitor as for the colour of the surroundings, green, blue or white? No importance really for the author. For you the colour shall be the most beautiful of all colours created by your own imagination.

This is the way to approach "Attarine" with a free and serene mind opposed the turmoil and the agitated and noisy characters of this work. Robert SCHINASI will allow to live with these characters an extravagant adventure in which you will be obliged to believe and in each street corner and in front of each house, you shall find a picturesque character with a simple mind and wording living in a street with violent pepper and strong oriental smells with huge laughter bursting in the sun.

CHAPTER 1

ABOU ZEID sitting on a wooden case, withdraws his feet from his turkish slippers which he moves for a long time in the sun... He then fumbles finding between his toes a sort of smelly black paste which he rolls between his fingers forming a small fatty ball perfectly round which he tastes but rejects immediately with a snort of disgust.

He shouts :

- Zeinab !...

But nobody answers.

- Dirty whore.... be damned !

Then a growl reaches him from behind the wall on which he is leaning.

- What do you want, my heart ?

ABOU Zeid 's face folds affectionately.

- Bring me my narghile and come and sit at my side, light of my eyes.

A wrinkled face appears and the mouth of Zeinab opens in a grin discovering a toothless jaw with two rotten stumps, then disappears.

- Come inside, dearest, where it is fresher. You know that I can't stand the sun.

But ABOU ZEID thunders in a threatening voice :

- If you do not bring immediately my narghile, I'll know what to do!

- Don't be angry, here I am.

- Is SOHAD with you ?

ABOU ZEID is obliged to repeat his question howling once more.

- I am asking you if SOHAD is with you ?

And the answer reaches him deafened.

- No, she left the house during your nap, my Prince !

A few moments later, ZEINAB appears with the narghile which she places respectfully at the feet of her husband.

ABOU ZEID inhales gluttonnely the first whiff from his narghile, then invites his wife to squat beside him.

- Sit down woman

ZEINAB reaches out for the narguile pleading :

- Please my beloved, let me have a puff.

ABOU ZEID groans :

- Woman, this is impossible. We cannot let our neighbours see you smoking.

ZEINAB bends her head regretfully.

- I know this and for this reason, I asked you to join me in the house.

ABOU ZEID bursts out laughing.

- Woman.... you are as crazy as ABDOU the monkey of our friend MUSTAPHA.

During the next moments, ABOU ZEID smokes in silence. He then asks :

- Where did SOHAD go ?

- I don't know, dearest. She left immediately after lunch.

ABOU ZEID growls :

- She must not go out alone, woman... She must not meet ABDEL HAMID the hairdresser...this impure son of a pig...

- The hairdresser ?

- Can't you hear what I am saying woman ? You know very well that I have definitely refused that SOHAD meets him. A real pansy... Do you find him handsome?

- No dearest, ABDEL HAMID is not handsome. Some people find him pretty like a woman and I can't understand for which reason, although your strict orders, SOHAD dreams of him every night waking us up while weeping his name.

- Such dreams should also be forbidden, if necessary with the help of my whip.

ABOU ZEID puffs furiously at his narghile.

- My daughter is in love with a pansy well dressed fool but you know the Arab saying : he never washes his feet, even to go and pray and yet he perfumes his bollocks.

ZEINAB shrieks with laughter :

- Ayou ! my Prince, perhaps that SOHAD loves such smells.

ABOU ZEID thunders :

- Keep silent, woman. You must refrain from joking on such serious matters. Can't you understand that misfortune shall strike our home if ABDEL HAMID enters our family ?

ZEINAB touches hastily the wooden case on which her husband is sitting.

- Ayou, ayou my man.... don't mention such a misfortune. ABDEL HAMID shall not marry my daughter.... and if finally he should do so, it shall be the fault of the government.

ABOU ZEID looks at his wife with pity.

- You are crazy woman... what has the government to do with ABDEL HAMID and our daughter. Believe me, we have a good and strong government.... as strong as Egypt itself. Of course, you know that our country is the most powerful in the world.

ZEINAB scratches her head, then answers doubtfully :

- Do you think so ?

ABOU ZEID burps noisily and after a sigh of satisfaction, explains :

- I shall prove my point immediately.

- Who is the most powerful man in the world ?

- Our Colonel GAMAL ABDEL NASSER....

ABOU ZEID nods approvingly and continues encouragingly :

- And what is the nationality of our Colonel ?

- Egyptian !

ABOU ZEID burps again joyously and pokes his finger in his wife's ribs.

- Now you understand my ZEINAB. If our Colonel is Egyptian and if he is the greatest man on earth, then our country is automatically the greatest contry in the world.

- Greater than America ,

- Of course, my sweet.

ZEINAB looks at her husband proudly. She scratches her head once more and admits with a laugh :

- Oh my man, you are right and not only are you strong and big but you also prove that you are the most intelligent.

ABOU ZEID swaggers proudly :

- Just touch my muscles, my sugary pigeon. Last week these arms carried hundreds of okes of vegetables and my boss told me that I was the strongest man he had never seen.

ZEINAB pinches carefully the muscles of her husband.

- Ayah... light of my eyes, you are indeed the strongest.

Then after a few moments silence, she asks curiously :

- But if you are so strong and if your boss considers you as the strongest man in Attarine street, please tell me for which reason you were discharged ?

ABOU ZEID sucks noisily the stem of his narghile and burps again before answering :

- Shut up woman. You don't understand anything. You remind me of those chattering magpies who should take care of their kitchen and children. You blasted bitch, I've had enough of you !

But ZEINAB doesn't lose her temper and insists :

- Please explain Oh my Prince... I can't understand and I am aware that my mind is as small as the head of a pin whilst your intelligence is as big as a mountain. So please explain, father of my only daughter and I shall try to understand.

ABOUT ZEID answers patiently :

- Well, as you know, I have worked for a whole week. This is too much for a man like me. During this week, I have earned some money and now I must stop working to spend my earnings. Do you understand, woman ? You must also know that next week, we shall enjoy BAIRAM and must prepare ourselves for this holy day by a serious meditation. But of course, you cannot understand my explanations. This is unimportant. Go away now, woman, as you may disturb my thoughts. Take back my narghile and I shall try to sleep.

ZEINAB obeys and vanishes quickly into the house.

ABOU ZEID lies down on the pavement. A fly troubles him for a moment but he kills it with a slap on his cheek. ABOU ZEID is too tired to wipe off his face the bleeding traces of the fly and he falls asleep.

CHAPTER 2

- Have you finished ? snarls the woman
- Please wait, pleads the man. I feel it coming...
- I have no time to lose, growls the woman. Is your orgasm coming or not ?
- Wait, I beg you....
- I am not waiting. Ten other customers are waiting outside.
- Please, Darling ! insists the man.

But an irritated hand gropes on the table near the bed and seizes the burning candle. FATMA howls :

- Dirty son of a bitch.... Ejaculate or I shall burn your ass.

The man straightens up moaning.

- Why are you so cruel with me, my beauty ?

FATMA calls outs :

- ALY !
- You are not going to ask him to come in, whispers the man evidently confused.

An eager voice answers from outside :

- Yes, my Gazelle....
- Bring immediately a towel and some hot water for my customer !

Then FATMA adds coldly :

- My price shall be 5 piasters.

- It's expensive, protests the man.

- It's the price, insists FATMA.

- Please, tell me which price you would have taken if you had burnt my
ass, inquires curiously the man.

FATMA brandishes furiously her slipper.

- Don't be angry, pleads the man. I shall pay your fee.

And while he slips into his galabeya, he asks with a worried look towards
the door.

- Who is ALY ?

- ALY is my husband, answers proudly the woman.

At the same moment, the door opens brutally, pushed by a sort of dwarf
with arched legs who looks away blushing in front of the suggestive picture
offered by his wife practically naked.

- What's wrong, my Heart, asks ALY in a thin voice.

Then, he looks at the man and growls :

- Any problem ?

The man replies eagerly :

- No, no !

Then the man stands up comparing for a few moments his 6 feet with the

reduced size of the dwarf.

ALY shows his bulging muscles, proudly.

- Do you want me to squash him completely ?

- Throw him out, proposes pleasantly FATMA.

- I am just leaving, says the man.

But the shriek of FATMA reaches him like a stone while he is preparing to open the door.

- Don't forget my husband's fee !

And ALY stretches his open hand very graciously.

- Thank you, my Prince !

The couple is left alone.

- How many customers are waiting outside ? asks FATMA.

- Not many, answers ALY. Hardly ten customers.

FATMA sighs :

- It's the dead season ! Let's hope that during spring, business will be brisker !

Then, she asks :

- Any one we know outside ?

- No, I don't think so. Apart MUSTAPHA, the monkey exhibitor, I don't see anybody that we know.

FATMA grows :

- You must ask MUSTAPHA to leave his monkey outside. Last time, the monkey

insisted to sleep also with me without paying.

- Ah, I forgot to tell you... said ALY. There is also a man in black

waiting outside with an attache-case.

- An attache-case ????

ALY, more accurate, informs :

- I believe that the man is a journalist. He asked me a lot of questions.

- Questions ! You are frightening me. What did he ask you ?

- He wants to know your monthly profits and the number of your daily visits. The price paid by each customer. He noted all this information on his pocket book.

MUSTAPHA believes that the man is a journalist who wishes to publish your photo in the newspapers.

- In the newspapers ? questions FATMA happily. This will double the number of my customers. Please, show him in immediately. This journalist !

ALY introduces respectfully the man in black who presents himself courteously.

- RAOUF CHERIF

Then he takes out from his attache-case his note-book and very

professionally, states :

- I have all the necessary information. Following the law of 1957, you should be taxed as a merchant. Furthermore, your husband is working separately as a garbage man. In other words, you have a double income and should both be taxed accordingly.

ALY and FATMA look sadly at the false journalist.

- What do you want ? asks FATMA anxiously.

RAOUF CHERIF answers severely :

- I'm a tax inspector !

- Well, man, please inspect ! suggests ALY in a friendly way.

- You are not a journalist, asks FATMA.

- No ! repeats the man. I'm a tax inspector !

- Please, begs FATMA, do not inspect too much. I can assure you that we have about ten people outside awaiting to inspect also.

- Shall I throw him out ? suggest ALY MANSOUR.

- No, you can let him talk while he is here.

- If I understand correctly, you are visited by thirty customers a day I believe ?

- No, thirty five, corrects FATMA.

- Thirty, confirms firmly ALY MANSOUR.

- Let's not discuss for five extra customers, states generously the inspector. I belong to an Administration which does not argue on such small differences... So, thirty clients per day represent approximately one thousand clients per month. That is about the figure ? Do you ANJOUee ?

- Yes, admits FATMA but I still cannot understand.

- You will understand quickly. After deduction of your professional expenses, I estimate that you should be taxed on 300 Pounds a year profit. This figure places you in abnormal and exceptional profits, taxed of course exceptionally!

- I admit that such figures are exceptional... My two other wives do not receive more than fifty customers a month... and together.

- This information is very interesting, states the inspector, noting the figures in his note-book. Then, he continues :

- As a result of my calculation, you should not be taxed on your first 100 Pounds profit. On the balance, you owe to our Department, over 100 Pounds on your profits. In addition, I still have to control your income during the last five years.

ALY MANSOUR murmurs :

- I think that I shall throw him out.

The inspector asks courteously :

- Are you going to pay me or not ?

- I shall not pay, answers firmly FATMA.

The inspector replies insidiously.

- If necessary, you can pay by cheque or cash.

- Thanks but my answer is still no !

- Is your decision irrevocable ,

- It is.... as you say... I shall not pay !

- In that case, answers the inspector, the law allows me to seize, dispose and resell your source of profit. You'll hear about me.

ALY MANSOUR yells :

- I think that I shall kick your ass.

But the inspector has already disappeared and FATMA weeps sadly :

- I shall be seized...

- Don't worry, answers ALY MANSOUR. The State can do anything. For me, the

sole danger is that they nationalize you...

The couple is dismayed.

At the same moment, the smiling face of MUSTAPHA, the monkey exhibitor, appears at the door left open.

- Can I come in, my friends ?

And he adds pleasantly :

- Why are you making such a face ?

FATMA answers sadly :

- The income tax inspector wants to seize my source of profits.

- Who told you that ? the journalist ?

ALY MANSOUR explains tragically :

- To start with, your journalist is not a journalist but a tax inspector who threatens to seize the capital of my three wives.

The monkey exhibitor bursts out laughing.

- So, what do you fear ?

ALY and FATMA look at each other sadly. MUSTAPHA continues shaking with laughter.

- Don't worry, he explains at last. The very zealous inspector shall surely be disowned by his administration who will hesitate before creating a serious mutiny of ALY MANSOUR and his three wives. Lastly, my good friends, please remember that prostitution does not exist in Egypt. This was declared by our Colonel GAMAL ABDEL NASSER during his last radio broadcast.

In consequence, your wives, my dear ALY, cannot be recognized as prostitutes.

The dwarf looks at MUSTAPHA with admiration. FATMA states :

- For me, the income tax inspector can only be a sionist agent charged to trouble our good city and more especially our Attarine street.

- Possible, exclaims the monkey exhibitor. But don't mention this to anyone. People may laugh at you.

- I can't even speak to my friends of the Abdallah coffee asks a disappointed ALY MANSOUR.

- Don't speak to anybody. If this inspector returns, please call me immediately. Well... for the moment, let's get busy on more serious matters.

And MUSTAPHA whisks off his galabeya while ALY MANSOUR leaves the room.

However, before closing the door, the garbage dealer drops a last remark.

- Do not worry, my Gazelle, if I am late this evening... I shall be at

"Abdallah coffee" where Uncle MOHAMMED is offering free drinks of mint tea

since early this morning.

CHAPTER 3

One hour later, ABOU ZEID wakes up and bellows through the basement window.

- ZEINAB... my ZEINAB... bring me my tea.

But this time, no one answers. So ABOU ZEID straightens up smoothing his crumbled galabeya. As he directs his steps towards the famous coffee

"Abdallah",

ABOU ZEID is proud to notice the admiring looks of the passers-by who must surely admit :

- This man is ABOU ZEID the strongest and most intelligent man of Attarine street.

On his way, he meets BOUTROS the learned master of the coptical school around the corner. BOUTROS is a wise man who teaches to read and write.

ABOU ZEID is secretly flattered by his deferent bow.

A few steps further, ALY MANSOUR, the garbage man, stops ABOU ZEID.

- Good morning my brother.

And ABOU ZEID replies politely.

- To see you enlightens my day

Then ABOU ZEID walks away with large footsteps while the dwarf tries to catch up.

Aly shouts :

- Please wait for me my brother. My legs are shorter than yours.

ABOU ZEID snorts :

- What do you want from me dwarf ?

- I have for you an extraordinary piece of news.

Pretending to be interested by a fruitshop, ABOU ZEID answers coldly :

- They are already selling the first mangoes. When I used to live in

Zagazig, I saw some mangoes as big as water melons.

ALY MANSOUR questions wistfully :

- And did you eat such mangoes ?

- No ! they were too expensive but I saw them several times and a third cousin of my brother's second wife tasted them.

ALY MANSOUR sighs :

- You are a lucky man.

ABOU ZEID spits impatiently.

- I have always believed that your mother fornicated with a donkey to have you. So I shall repeat once more. I never tasted these mangoes but the third cousin of my brother's second wife tasted them. Now, do you understand ?

The garbage man bows his head.

- Don't be angry with me, my brother. I was just chattering before

breaking to you a piece of extraordinary news.

- What sort of news, dwarf ? Are you marrying for a fourth time ? If that is the case, are your three wives not sufficient for your prosperity and for the happiness of your friends.

ALY exclaims :

- Please do not mention my three wives who are hard working women preparing my old age. As you know my brother life is hard and one cannot always find complete happiness with one's own wife. In your case...

But ABOU ZEID interrupts him violently.

- What do you mean, you conceited dwarf ?

ALY continues in a friendly tone.

- What I mean is that you visit my wives when your pockets are full and when your warm blood troubles you.

ABOU ZEID looks at ALY with pity.

- Do you know that the other night I fornicated all three without stopping for a moment ? Remember that I am like that and when I returned home, I spent the rest of the night fornicated with my ZEINAB. Perhaps for this reason people call me the bull of Attarine street.

- ALLAH, you are a real man and so generous !

- I paid your wives 5 Piasters each.

- May ALLAH bless you. You know my normal price but I must admit that I am unable to fix a price for a cock like you. I've always told my wives that there is only one ABOU ZEID in Alexandria.

ABOU ZEID answers modestly:

- Thank you my brother

Then he asks :

- Did they remit you my money ?

ALY spits :

- Those dirty bitches... they would have preferred to hide the money from me. But I watch them very closely. Especially since my profession of garbage man has become much less interesting than during the blessed time of the British occupation. You can believe me when I tell you that I used to find some lovely fruit hardly corrupt which I could resell without any difficulty.

ABOU ZEID growls severely :

- Do not regret the english troops ALY and remember that to day our great arab nation lives under the rule of its biggest leader : Colonel GAMAL ABDEL NASSER.

The garbage man states very quickly :

- May ALLAH keep him alive for many years !

Then he adds :

- But may ALLAH be blessed to have given me three strong bitches who can compensate the problems of our times. By the way... when do you expect to visit them ?

ABOU ZEID reflects :

- Probably on friday evening after the prayer, but this time you will accept a special price.

- For the three ?

ABOU ZEID proudly answers :

- Yes my brother. Remember that I am from Zagazig and most of my friends coming from there are like me.

ALY asks inducingly :

- Don't you prefer me to fix a firm price on a monthly basis ?

- No ! you would lose too much.

- Then come and see us on Friday and don't worry, we shall come to some arrangement.

Then, lifting his hand to his heart, he adds :

- Remember that I love you as a brother and you can be sure that my wives shall be exceptionnally good to you on your next visit.

- Thank you ALY.

- So I shall relate my story which I heard from ABDALLAH, the coffee shop owner, who heard it from GABER, the cartload carrier, who holds it directly from your uncle MOHAMMED, the hero of this story.

ALY stops his story, looks up expectingly at ABOU ZEID, then belches violently.

- Many happy returns, says ABOU ZEID courteously.

- My story is true, continues ALY. I swear on my eyes and on those of my deceased mother.

ABOU ZEID growls :

- Speak up man. You are making me lose some precious time.

So ALY begins his story.

- You know that your Uncle MOHAMMED enjoys going to the central station at

the moment of the arrival of the trains from the country !

- I know this. Its an excellent habit which allows him to pick up the idiotic villagers at their arrival. After a good mint tea, they are generally willing to offer him their savings.

ALY continues :

- Well, this time the story is still more interesting than usual. Let's sit down next to this wall and open your ears to hear the rest of this

adventure.

ABOU ZEID snarls :

- You stinking, decaying bastard. I've been listening to you for the last ten minutes but you are always at the same point of your story which is not advancing.

ALY insists :

- Sit down Oh my brother ! You shall not regret listening to me.

The two men squat on the pavement protected by the walls of the town jail. Suddenly a flight of children dressed in rags with their eyes covered with crust and flies surround them.

- Give us a millime, my Lords ! Give us a millime.

But ABOU ZEID with one or two clouts well placed, accompanied by some violent insults, restores order.

- Bastards... crawling worms.... carriers of illnesses... fuck off before I kill you !

The children, visibly impressed by the thundering voice of the giant, move away some steps but do not lose a word of the conversation between the two men.

ABOU ZEID continues in a sweeter tone :

- Go on with your story, ALY. The truth is that my uncle MOHAMMED is a great man.

- So yesterday, at 7 O'clock, he saw at the station a fat peasant as I love them with big mustaches like bicycle handlebars, with a new gallabeya and a silk scarf. The peasant was dragging with difficulty two very heavy suitcases. You Uncle MOHAMMED approaches him, presents himself politely, then proposes to drag one of the suitcases. This generous offer is accepted with gratefulness. A few moments later, the two men are seated together in the same tramway heading for the beach of Anfouchy.

Since a few moments, ABOU ZEID is smiling. Then suddenly a huge laughter shakes violently his 150 kilos. He cannot stop and tears flow from his eyes. This laughter gains ALY, then the children who roll in the mud, chirping with joy. When at last ABOU ZEID can speak, he says :

- By ALLAH, I guess the rest of the story. My uncle is certainly a great man and may the Prophet keep him alive to continue his business with the village peasants. His stories with them have become a legend and people will speak of them during the next 10 000 years.

ALY asks shyly :

- Do you want a cigarette ?

ABOU ZEID answers slightly disturbed.

- No, my brother. SAYEDA, the healer told me that tobacco is not recommended to strengthen my virility.

ALY protests :

- Surely bad for others but not for our Attarine champion.

ABOU ZEID replies humbly.

- Thank you, oh my brother ! I always knew that you were a good man.

This answer distorts ALY's face into a smile.

- I believe that SAYEDA has not appreciated personally your virility.

ABOU ZEID reassures him :

- You would not like me to fornicate with such an old witch !

ALY retorts :

- And yet her behind is as large as the ass of a cow.

- Do you like her ?

- Yes, says ALI with simplicity.

ABOU ZEID smiles :

- Well he can be your future fourth wife. As for me, I'm not interested and I'm sure that ZEINAB would be jealous. By the way, have you finished your story, oh ALY ?

The garbage man continues :

- No, my story is not finished ! It has only started. Just picture the two men sitting together in the tramway. While the peasant is looking through the window, Uncle MOHAMMED slips in the hands of the controller a Pound

note to pay for the two tickets.

ABOU ZEID interrupts him violently :

- Ayou ! Why did my Uncle pay one Pound for two tickets which do not cost more than 1 Piaster each ? Why ? Alas, my poor Uncle has become insane.

But ALY continues :

- Just wait, oh my brother ! As the controller did not have any change, your Uncle reassured him stating he was not leaving the tramway before Anfouchy which allowed the possibility for the controller to find the change of the Pound with other passengers during the rest of the trip.

ABOU ZEID exclaims heartily :

- Ayou my brother ! ALLAH is merciful and my Uncle is not insane.

ALY pursues his story :

- You can picture the scene with your Uncle sitting beside the peasant and convincing him that he was the proprietor of the tramway. This fact seemed hard to believe initially but when the peasant saw the controller reimbursing to your Uncle the change of the Pound, he was easily convinced that the amount paid represented the value of the tickets sold to the other passengers.

ABOU ZEID chuckles with joy :

- Ayah, my Uncle is a genius !

The garbage man pursues his story :

- Your Uncle MOHAMMED, managed to convince the peasant that he was spending the whole day in the tramway collecting the proceeds obtained from

the sale of the tickets. Understanding that this system could permit him to earn a large income without working, the peasant believed readily that the meeting with ABOU ZEID was a sign of ALLAH. So after thanking profusely the prophet, the villager suggested to close the purchase of the tramway with a cash payment of 100 pounds which was immediately settled by the grateful peasant. A paper was prepared by your uncle MOHAMMED always very strict in

his business. Of course as neither of them could read or write, the said paper was filled up with meaningless signs and uncle MOHAMMED left the tramway immediately after with the 100 pounds and also the warm blessings of the peasant I have been informed that the peasant spent the rest of the day sitting beside the controller checking conscientiously payments effected by the passengers.

ABOU ZEID shakes with laughter :

- Ayou... ALY, what a wonderful story !

And ALY answers :

- I swear on the life of ALLAH that this story is true and I still have to tell you how the story continued. A fifth cousin of the great grand mother of my third wife was in the same tramway also on his way to Anfouchy and told me the rest of the story. After the departure of your uncle the peasant started a conversation with the controller. But as suspicious as all the peasants from lower Egypt, he hid from him the fact that he had become proprietor of the tramway. He was indeed happy to learn from the controller that the daily income exceeded often ten pounds. By keeping his purchase as a secret, the peasant hoped to check with accuracy the income of his purchase.

So he remained in the tramway all day settling to the controller the value of each ticket owed by him on his transports and every payment cashed by the controller was duly noted in his pocket book. My story now ends unfortunately because the fifth cousin of the great grand mother of my wife was obliged to leave the tramway. Ayou... my brother ABOU ZEID... You can of course now imagine...

How the story ended.??.. When the peasant showed his false ownership title the controller burst out laughing. The two men surely quarreled together and finished their dispute in front of Colonel MISHMISH, the officer in charge of the police station of Attarine.

ABOU ZEID slaps heartily the back of ALY MANSOUR who winches:

- Ayou... what a story ! Do you know where is my uncle actually ? I must congratulate him !

- Of course he is the coffee Abdallah offering mint teas to his friends.

ABOU ZEID howls :

- Son of a bitch ! Why did you not tell me this before ?

ABOU ZEID stands up surrounded immediately by the pack of howling kids.

- A millime my prince. Give us a millime please.

But ABOU ZEID does not have to answer. He stoops and picks up a heavy stone that he throws in the direction of the children who scatter.

Then he walks away with his gallabeya too large dancing around him.

ALY MANSOUR, the garbage man follows as quickly as he can .

CHAPTER 4

ABDALLAH renown's coffee shop is swarming to day with their regular customers. Seldom are newcomers accepted.

A story goes around stating that during the first palestinian war a young coptic soldier insisted to buy a drink of alcohol. Facing the violent protests from the other moslem customers he withdraw from his pocket a brand new revolver that he placed proudly on the table.

When the police found him a few hours later he was roaming completely naked not far away from the Mahmoudieh canal.

A complaint was immediatly lodged by ABDALLAH himself as well as by his customers but nothing happened as no proof could be gathered against them and furthermre hag AHMED door keeper of the Attarine mosque swore solemnly

on the sacred beard of the prophet that not only this soldier had not been seen in the Abdallah coffee place but also that he hadn't personally left this coffee all day.

A story goes around that this soldier was severely punished by his officers.

That evening, Abdallah coffee place is particularly buoyant with its four tables fully occupied and with mint teas and coffees circulating without interruption.

ABDALLAH has been obliged to borrow three narghiles from an obliging neighbour present that evening.

Such rejoicing had not been witnessed since the accession of the colonel GAMAL ABDEL NASSER.

This gathering is indeed illustrious and among the distinguished guests can be recognized HAG AHMED the door keeper of the Attarine Mosque, MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, the fag stump collector, ALY ZEIDAN, the shoe shine specialist, GAMAL EL DIN, the public writer, GABER, the cart hauler and also so many others whose names are unfortunately forgotten to day.

Strangely enough among the guests of this coffee can be seen HARALAMBO, the greek grocer and also ISAAC, the celebrated marriage broker.

MOUSTAPHA, the monkey exhibitor appeared for a few moments with his monkey

but ABDALLAH refused to serve him in front of such a distinguished assembly.

Everybody speaks, shouts, sings and one can hardly hear or see in the smoky atmosphere created by the action of the narghiles.

The king of this assembly is no doubt Uncle MOHAMMED and the evening reaches its peak with the arrival of ABOU ZEID and ALY MANSOUR welcomed by

a concert of yells.

After a sign from Uncle MOHAMMED, ABDALLAH rushes outside and returns with

two new narghiles which he places in front of the two last arrivals.

Uncle MOHAMMED bows :

- May ALLAH bless you my friends. Tonight you will taste in your narghiles a special paste imported directly from ARABIA by a smuggler. Tell them... Tell them ABDALLAH that you are not serving them a common haschich this evening.

ABDALLAH bows :

- My bey... ABOU ZEID PACHA, this narghile will bestow to you a special intoxication unobtainable from the most beautiful prostitute operating in Sister's street.

HAG AHMED yells from the other side of the coffee house :

- Long life to Uncle MOHAMMED. May he relate his adventures to his great grand children ?

Uncle MOHAMMED smiles and for a moment, the turmoil ceases.

- I'm not married my friends and aged 60 years ! I do not expect to have one day some great grand children to whom I may relate my adventures.

ALY MANSOUR remarks :

- If you have no wife at home, why don't you pay a visit to one of my charming wives ?

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, the fag stump collector protests :

- No for our friend Uncle MOHAMMED, we must find a true virgin !

ISAAC suggests :

- If you are interested, I know a charming virgin aged 12. A true flower, pure and innocent with an ass that could even excite GAAFAR, the eunuch. I shall speak to her father who will accept to give her to you. You are such a rich man ! One hundred pounds !

ALY ZEIDAN asks :

- Do you want your commission ?

But ISAAC answers :

- No, I refuse a commission. Uncle MOHAMMED is a friend and one does not conclude business with a friend.

Uncle MOHAMMED raises his right hand claiming for silence.

- My dear friends, I am too old to marry !

ALY MANSOUR still following his idea asks :

- You are still thinking of my wives ?

- No, answers Uncle MOHAMMED. I have decided to leave for Mecca.

HAG AHMED yells :

- A pious idea, Uncle MOHAMMED ! I believe that you have been inspired by ALLAH. If you wish, I can accompany you.

Once again, a general vociferation deafens everybody but Uncle MOHAMMED

protests :

- No, my brother ! I shall not offer you this trip. I shall leave Alexandria with some pilgrims.

GAMAL EL DIN, the public writer retorts :

- But with this news from Palestine, don't you fear trouble like last year ?

The looks of the audience rotate around the coffee room and concentrate on ISAAC who quivers in his chair. The voice of MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, the fag stump collector, can be heard.

- Don't fear anything, Uncle MOHAMMED ! Our country is the most powerful in the world and Israël shall not attack us.

- Are you sure ?

- I am sure, replies the fag stump collector. The Jews have received in Port Saïd a lesson that they shall never forget. Remember that Port Saïd is considered as the Stalingrad of our war.

- Let's change conversation, insinuates ISAAC.

But ALY ZEIDAN, the shoe shiner, bellows with wrath :

- Why should we hide our victory in Port Saïd ? Man, are you afraid of us ?

The voice of HARALAMBO, the grocer, can then be heard :

- Calm down, my friends. Let's not fight to day. ISAAC is our friend. We

all love him.... Don't we ?

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT profits of the hubbub of vociferations to liberate a discreet fart which nobody hears but which colors the atmosphere with a nauseous foul smell.

Uncle MOHAMMED taps on the the table asking for silence.

- ABDALLAH, bring us some watermelon grains for everybody.

And a few moments later, a big basin full of watermelon grains black and tasty is presented to the audience. Groping hands reach for the grains and very soon can only be heard noise of mastication of the jaws accompagnied by the whistling and spitting of this illustrious assembly.

GABER, the cart hauler, enjoys spitting his munched grains on ALY ZEIDAN who is sitting at the far end corner of the coffee place. Unfortunately, he misses his target and it is ISAAC who receives in his eye a watermelon grain.

He cries :

- Aïe ! ... You have hurt me !

Everybody laughs and ABOU ZEID louder than the others. He says :

- Give me your hand, ISAAC. You are our friend even if our Egyptian radio informs us that you are a thief and a murderer.

ISAAC stands up and squeezes ABOU ZEID in his arms. When he sits down, everybody can notice that his eyes are wet.

Uncle MOHAMMED asks :

- You are not crying, are you ISAAC ? This evening everybody should be happy and we love you all !

But please do not believe that ISAAC is really crying. The tears in his eyes mean that he is indeed happy to spend his evening with such friends.

As a matter of fact, since a long time, he is no more invited to share such festivities.

And even this morning, children threw stones at him in the street calling him "dirty Jew !". ISAAC does not understand much in politics. Although he is secretly proud of Israël, his only wish is to finish his life in peace with his friends in the country where he was born as well as his father, the father of his father and so many others before... One day, he shall die and rest in this Egyptian earth... unless...

GAMAL EL DIN questions Uncle MOHAMMED :

- If you leave for your pilgrimage, I presume you shall take the desert route ?

Uncle MOHAMMED answers :

- Why this question ?

- Because I believe you can conclude some very interesting business on your way.

Uncle MOHAMMED looks at GAMAL EL DIN and for a few moments everybody stops

shouting.

- Of course, you have heard about the strategic retreat of our glorious army !

- Of course !

The scribe pursues :

- You have heard evidently that our brave soldiers had been ordered to retreat before the advance of the Sionist hords !

- I know this.

- Well, our brave soldiers in order to retreat faster, did not hesitate to take off their shoes which are now lying in the desert.

- By ALLAH ... Do you mean that all their shoes have been left in the desert ?

- Yes, answers the scribe. I understand that some Bedouin tribes have got hold of these shoes which they can willingly sell for a very special price.

- What for ? questions absent mindedly ABOU ZEID.

- Who wears shoes to day ? asks ALY MANSOUR.

- Shut up garbage man, answers severely Uncle MOHAMMED. You are a donkey

and you too, ABOU ZEID ! Do you know GAMAL that your ideas are interesting

and I shall study them. By the way, I went to see you at your booth this morning but I did not find you !

- If he was not there, he was elsewhere, mentioned ALY ZEIDAN sententiously but nobody comments such an interesting remark.

GAMAL answers :

- I did not work to day because I had a good reason !

- Which reason ? asks Uncle MOHAMMED.

GAMAL EL DIN smiles :

- Because I concluded also a very good business.

- What business ? Tell us, oh GAMAL....

- Well, most of you are acquainted with HASSAN CHAFIK, the baker. He came to see me this morning asking me to write a letter to his proprietor. As he did not have any change, he trusted me with a ten Pound note to be changed...

That is the reason for which I did not return to my stall to day.

- Ayou, GAMAL. So you are also in business and you must be also a rich man... Ten Pounds !

- Yes, sufficiently rich, answers the scribe bashfully.

- Then why don't you accompany me in my pilgrimage to Mecca ?

GAMAL EL DIN answers :

- For the moment, I have other ambitions. I'm trying to gather 50 Pounds.

This amount is necessary to permit me to extract all my teeth.

- Why do you want to extract your teeth ? They are sane.

- You are right, answers GAMAL. But listen to my idea. I want to extract them and replace them by golden teeth.

- ALLAH ! ... what a marvellous idea, says ABOU ZEID. To have golden teeth will prove to everybody that you are a rich man.

GABER stands up.

- Do you want me to sing a song ?

- Sit down, answers HARALAMBO. You shall sing later this evening.

And he relates :

- Do you know that I saw in a window display of a shop near Attarine church a magnificent portrait of Saint Sebastian ? I admired it during several days but when I finally entered the shop the owner asked 5 Pounds for this portrait... That thief !

ABOU ZEID, horrified, states :

- 5 Pounds is very expensive for a portrait of Saint Sebastian !

ISAAC suggests :

- I believe that I can obtain for you a similar picture at a lower price.

HARALAMBO continues :

- That is not the point... Listen to the rest of my story. You have of course seen portraits of Saint Sebastian ?

- Yes, answers ABOU ZEID thoughtlessly.

HARALAMBO looks at him severely and asks :

- Well, describe me a normal portrait of Saint Sebastian.

ABOU ZEID scratches his head and then, looks at GAMAL EL DIN, the public scribe who looks away. HARALAMBO pursues :

- I'll describe to you the portrait of Saint Sebastian. It's the image of a man with his chest pierced by arrows.

ALY MANSOUR spits on the floor.

- And such a picture is worth 5 Pounds ?

- Yes, but that is not the whole story. In the same shop, I discovered a portrait of GAMAL ABDEL NASSER of the same size. The shop owner wanted only

2 Pounds for this portrait. When I asked him the reason for the important difference in price, the shop keeper answered : "If the breast of GAMAL ABDEL NASSER had been pierced by arrows, I would have then asked a price of 10 Pounds for such a portrait...".

For a while, nobody speaks, except ISAAC who chuckles in his corner but when everybody looks at him, he stops laughing. Then, suddenly, Uncle

MOHAMMED burst out laughing :

- Ayou ... Ya ALLAH... Your story is very funny !

ALY MANSOUR asks :

- Can I now tell you the story of the Jew and the goat ?

- No, thank you. We don't want to hear this story.

At the same moment, the coffee door opens and a little boy appears :

- Is ABOU ZEID there ?

- Who is asking for me ?

- SOHAD 's mother insists on your immediate return home.

ABOU ZEID growls :

- Tell this female that unfortunately I am exceedingly busy and cannot be disturbed.

The little boy insists :

- The matter is very urgent. ZEINAB speaks of a real drama. A tragedy...

ABOU ZEID grumbles :

- A tragedy... A tragedy. Are you sure of what you say ? All the females always speak of tragedies... I'am obliged to leave you my friends. Please, wait for me, I shall return a little later.

ALY MANSOUR suggests :

- Do you want me to come with you ?

- No, you repellent foetus. Keep on drinking your mint tea with hashich
in company of our friends while I take care personally of my problems.
A few moments later, the door closes behind ABOU ZEID.

CHAPTER 5

ABOU ZEID is furious. ZEINAB, the bitch, always disturbs him when he is especially busy.

So, he returns home with large footsteps accompanied by the child who is obliged to run in order to keep up with him.

ABOU ZEID grumbles :

- Blasted females.. May ALLAH roast you in inferno. I shall teach you that you cannot disturb ABOU ZEID without paying for the consequences.

The man and the child reach the threshold of the house. They stop and gaze at each other composing together the strange picture of a giant with clenched enormous fists like hammers and a midget trembling on slender legs as thin as matches.

The child is scared and doesn't dare to follow ABOU ZEID inside the house.

He shall be obliged to listen from the outside the dispute which is about to start and, to morrow, the interested neighbours shall fill up his pockets with coloured sweets in exchange of his detailed report on the words exchanged between ABOU ZEID and his beloved wife.

Both shall keep an unforgettable memory of the events of this evening.

ABOU ZEID notices that his wife is with SOHAD and that the two women are crouching in a corner of the room weeping in the arms of each other.

Between two sobs, ABOU ZEID hears a sort of monotonous chant similar to the

monochord lullabies which ZEINAB used to sing years ago to soothe SOHAD.

The two women do not rise to greet ABOU ZEID who yells :

- Have you become insane ? I shall get you locked in the Abbassieh asylum!

Since when do my women forget to rise when I enter this house ?

The chant stops suddenly and the two women straighten up. ZEINAB throws herself at the feet of her husband moaning.

- Ayou... my beloved ! Evil shall harm our family. It is my fault because

I sometimes forget to burn the incense in this house. Now, what will become of us ?

SOHAD has also straightened up. Looks up at her father with a haggard face. She is visibly scared and trembles.

ABOU ZEID yells :

- Why did you disturb me ? Why those tears ? What 's going on in this house ?

SOHAD looks away trembling more than ever. ZEINAB grasps her hair with full hands which she tears away violently. She moans in the midst of her sobs.

ABOU ZEID yells :

- Women, stop immediately this fuss.

The voice thunders in the room and ABOU ZEID himself is startled. SOHAD

throws herself on the floor besides her mother.

Then ZEINAB says :

- Oh my beloved husband, you are as strong as the ox of our cousin Ferdous.

When your voice thunders in this house, even the walls shake with fear.

ABOU ZEID calms down and now asks in a quieter voice :

- Women... explain. What's going on ?

SOHAD has straightened up and dances on one foot then on the other. She

hesitates, then turns to her mother who says :

- Sit down, oh my man ! SOHAD, please fetch a chair for your father.

SOHAD is more than happy with this diversion and rushes immediately to the

kitchen returning with a stool.

ZEINAB instructs her daughter :

- Please, bring me a bowl of hot water. I shall massage your father's feet.

ABOU ZEID is not alarmed by such a treatment. After all, a man who returns

to his house is entitled to all attentions.

He orders :

- ZEINAB, light the candle. I can't see you in this darkness.

He sits on the stool and with a sigh of content, dips his toes in the hot

water>.

- You don't fear the heat of the water , asks SOHAD.

ZEINAB replies :

- Don't worry, oh my beloved ! the water is hardly warm and I shall now scratch your toes which will slacken your nerves. My hand shall be as sweet as a spring breeze. SOHAD, please fetch your father's narghile.

A few moments later, SOHAD reappears with the lit narghile which she places in front of her father and then, crouches at his feet.

He looks at her. Since some time already, she has become a woman. How old is she ? Twelve ? Thirteen ? She has already fat breasts similar to the goatskin bottles of HAMROUSH, the water carrier. ABOU ZEID shall have to speak to ISAAC of his daughter. It is time that he searches for a good husband for her.

ABOU ZEID remarks to his daughter.

- Since some time, I notice that you are growing into a woman.

SOHAD giggles looking at her mother.

ABOU ZEID adds :

- Tomorrow, I shall buy you a beautiful pink dress as it is time that you start thinking of marriage.

This time SOHAD's giggle has become a sneer and she wiggles whilst looking at her father.

ZEINAB does not say a word but suddenly hers fingers move feverishly on

ABOU ZEID's toes.

He remarks :

- ALLAH... woman your fingers are usually softer on my toes.

And ZEINAB in a husky voice :

- I have to tell you oh my beloved....

Then she hesitates :

- What do you mean ? speak up woman !

SOHAD has stopped sneering and ZEINAB admits with a sigh of despair.

- Our daughter has faulted, ya ABOU ZEID.

For a while, nobody speaks and the people in the room seem frozen into silent statues. ABOU ZEID, speechless, does not understand. Then startled, he looks at his wife, starts raising from his stool, opens his mouth, then closes it and, at last, manages to ask :

- What are you saying, woman ? Repeat... explain...

It is too late for ZEINAB to explain. She must speak, try and find excuses, perhaps.

- Our daughter has faulted with ABDEL HAMID, the hairdresser she mumbles.

This time, the words are understood and a terrible roar escapes from ABOU ZEID who stands up spilling the bowl on the two women lying at his feet.

SOHAD moans :

- Please, do not be angry, oh my father. I beg you to try and forgive me.

As for ZEINAB, she continues tearing away her hair.

ABOU ZEID howls :

- You damned bitch... You have dishonoured me...

And he clenches his fists advancing towards his daughter. With his gallabeya tucked up and his hairy legs comically apart, one could have laughed if a desire of murder had not appear in his eyes.

He takes another step towards SOHAD who is weeping pitifully. He could easily crush her against the wall with a single blow of his fists.

ZEINAB yells :

- Do not kill her. She is your daughter.

But ABOU ZEID has become deaf. He continues advancing, his eyes bulging.

His daughter tries to protect herself with hers arms fearfully upright.

Suddenly ABOU ZEID stumbles clumsily and grasping his breast, he cries :

- Aïe, my heart ! I'm dying. Help me to sit down !

SOHAD rushes to him.

- No, not you. ZEINAB, help me !

And soon, ABOU ZEID is sitting again on the stool with sweat dripping along his cheeks, unless it is only tears. ABOU ZEID shouts to his daughter :

- Vanish from my sight, you bloody whore !

ZEINAB crouches near her husband.

- So you are telling me that our daughter has faulted ?

- Yes, oh my husband, acknowledges gently ZEINAB.

- Perhaps could you take her to morrow to SAYEDA, the healer, who may then sow on our daughter a new virginity ?

- No, this is too late, SOHAD is pregnant.

This time ABOU ZEID cannot find the strength to yell.

ABOU ZEID adds :

- SOHAD is pregnant since 4 months.

This is too much for ABOU ZEID whose eyes are closed. One could believe that he is asleep if he were not rocking on his stool.

Suddenly he orders :

- Call immediately that damned ABDEL HAMID and ask him to come here immediately.

- I have already done so but he refuses to come.

ABOU ZEID opens his eyes.

- Then, I shall have to kill him.

ABOU ZEID is too tired to discuss. He closes his eyes and keeps on swinging on his stool and he will spend the whole night with his wife lying at his feet, sniffing and moaning continuously.

CHAPTER 6

The following day, at dawn, ABOU ZEID leaves his house, walking along Attarine street, looking downwards, practically grazing the walls. ABOU ZEID is ashamed. He believes that everybody knows his secret.

Very soon, he finds himself in front of Uncle MOHAMMED's house. He shouts:

- Open the door. I'm ABOU ZEID.

A shadow appears behind the blinds.

- What do you want from me at this hour ? Go back to sleep, man !

ABOU ZEID insists.

- Open your door for the life of your mother ! I have to speak to you.

Uncle MOHAMMED grumbles :

- Leave my poor mother in peace ! Did ZEINAB chase you from your bed to sleep with her lover ?

ABOU ZEID wavers under the insult but he insists :

- Please, let me in, Uncle ! I have important matters to discuss with you.

The figure disappears from the window and a few moments later, the door opens.

Uncle MOHAMMED rumbles :

- You scared me when you arrived. I thought that you were the police.

- It was only me, answers candidly ABOU ZEID.

- I can see that it's you, you big idiot !

The he adds cordially :

- Come in all the same. My home is yours. I'll prepare a coffee for you.

- You are very kind but I do not wish to abuse of your hospitality.

- In such a case, you should have abstained from waking me at such an early hour. So come in or go away !

This time, ABOU ZEID follows his uncle inside the house.

He then asks in a low voice :

- Are you alone ?

- My word ! You are completely insane ! First, you wake me up at dawn.

Then, you speak to me in a tone so low that I cannot hear you...

ABOU ZEID repeats in a higher tone :

- Are you alone ?

- Of course ! Sit down, man. I'll prepare some coffee.

Uncle MOHAMMED disappears for a few minutes, then returns with two steaming cups.

- Here you are !

Then he starts sipping noisily his coffee. He burps with pleasure and very politely, ABOU ZEID belches too. These exquisite manners help them to start

their conversation.

- What do you want from me, this morning ?

ABOU ZEID doesn't know how to start. He asks :

- Have you met my daughter, SOHAD ?

- Of course. A beautiful girl, indeed. You should speak to ISAAC about her.

The conversation has started stupidly. ABOU ZEID feels that he is about to get completely mixed up. He asks :

- Do you know ABDEL HAMID, the hairdresser ?

Uncle MOHAMMED smiles.

- Who doesn't know our ABDEL HAMID Yesterday he mowed my head. This young

man will go very far.

- I am sure of that, answers ABOU ZEID.

- You are sure of what ? asks MOHAMMED puzzled.

- That he is going too far !

- I don't understand.

ABOU ZEID cannot find the courage to explain.

- You mean that he wishes to marry your daughter ?

- No ! He refuses to marry my daughter !

Uncle MOHAMMED, exasperated, stands up shouting :

- Stop it, you fool.... Are you trying to play riddles with me ?

- No !

- Man, by the Prophet, explain !

- Well, stutters ABOU ZEID very embarrassed. ABDEL HAMID refuses to marry SOHAD, but he has deflowered her.

Uncle MOHAMMED, startled, questions :

- Are you sure?

- Yes.

- This is a very serious matter but you can solve the problem.

- Which way Uncle ?

- You must take your daughter to see Sayeda the healer.

- No.

- Why do you refuse, answers the Uncle. Sayeda shall keep the secret and shall sow a new virginity for your daughter and if ABDEL HAMID speaks, we have ways and means to keep him silent.

But ABOU ZEID desperately bows his head.

- No, Uncle ! You don't understand. It's too late. SOHAD is pregnant.

- That's more serious.

- I know she is pregnant since four months but she only told me about the problem yesterday evening.

- Ayou, my poor man !

ABOU ZEID slaps his cheek violently, then moans.

- Do you have an idea, Uncle ? What can we do ?

- Shut up, let me think, answers the uncle.

MOHAMMED continues sipping his coffee for a long moment and suddenly says :

- I have an idea ! We must call ABDEL HAMID immediately.

- I have already thought of that.

- Well ?

- ABDEL HAMID refuses to come.

- Then, you should kill him.

- I know, admits ABOU ZEID.

Then snarls the uncle :

- What are you waiting for ?

- It's impossible !

- Why ?

But ABOU ZEID cannot answer this question. He doesn't dare to explain that ZEINAB refuses the murder of ABDEL HAMID. But Uncle MOHAMMED insists :

- Why do you refuse to kill the lover of your daughter ?

ABOU ZEID answers sadly :

- There is perhaps some other solution. You are the only man who can find

this solution.

Uncle MOHAMMED mutters between his teeth :

- Frankly, my nephew has lost his mind. A man deflowers his daughter and he refuses to kill this man !

Uncle MOHAMMED reaches for his cup and takes another noisy sip of coffee.

- Have a sip also. This will do you good.

During the next moments, are only to be heard the clicking and sucking of the tongues tasting the burning coffee. ABOU ZEID watches his uncle with admiration.

Uncle MOHAMMED, his eyebrows wrinkled and his powerful mind at work, is in

the process of thinking. Suddenly, he exclaims :

- I have found... You must write a letter to him !

- Write a letter to him ? repeats ABOU ZEID startled.

- Yes, cries triumphantly Uncle MOHAMMED... a letter.... that is the solution.

- A letter ? What for ?

- To ask him to come !

ABOU ZEID asks :

- Do you know how to write a letter ?

- No, answers candidly the Uncle, neither do you...

- I don't understand, answers ABOU ZEID. Neither of us can read or write and yet, you want us to send him a letter which he will not be able to read himself.

Uncle MOHAMMED exclaims :

- Ayou, my nephew... How stupid you are. We don't need to read or write to prepare this letter.

- I don't understand.

- It is simple. GAMAL EL DIN, the scribe, shall write this letter.

- Ah ! but if ABDEL HAMID cannot read the letter, in which way shall this letter help us ?

Uncle MOHAMMED explains :

- It is unimportant that he reads or does not read this letter. The important point is that he receives it.

- Ah ! I have understood.

- No, you have not understand. You are a donkey without any brains , man.

But I shall try to explain. We prepare a letter for ABDEL HAMID.

ABOU ZEID interrupts him intelligently.

- The letter will be written by GAMAL EL DIN, the scribe.

- That's it. The letter will be delivered to him by a messenger and this messenger will ask him to come immediately. Have you understood, now ?

- No !

- By the Prophet's beard, you are still more stupid than I thought. I

shall try and explain my idea otherwise.

- I am listening, oh my uncle.

MOHAMMED starts patiently once more his explanations.

- Have you ever received a letter ?

- Who ? Me ?

- Yes ! You ! There is nobody but us two in this room. So, answer me, have

you ever received a letter ?

- What about you ? questions stupidly ABOU ZEID.

Uncle MOHAMMED, cooperating, answers :

- I've never received a single letter during my whole life.

- Neither have I, answers ABOU ZEID very simply.

- Well, if you receive a letter and if the messenger asks you to follow

him, what do you do ?

- I follow him, answers ABOU ZEID.

- Why ?

- To learn the contents of the letter.

- man you have now understood my crafty plan. Go and fetch GAMAL EL DIN

and later advise HAG AHMED, MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, ALY ZEIDAN and GABER that

they are to come here within an hour. If necessary, you shall drag them out of their beds.

ABOU ZEID has not understand very well his uncle's plan but he feels reassured.

He slips out of his turkish slippers and starts running down Attarine street as fast as he can.

CHAPTER 7

- Come in, my friends, says Uncle MOHAMMED to GAMAL EL DIN and ABOU ZEID.

The scribe settles down in front of the kitche table and Uncle MOHAMMED breaks the news to him :

- You have been notified of this meeting for a very important matter.

- I'm listening, answers respectfully the scribe. Have you got some paper and pencil to write, man ?

The scribe answers eagerly :

- Yes !

And he takes out of his pocket a pencil and a crumpled piece of paper which he flattens on the table

- Well, write man !

- I'm writing, answers the scribe still flattening the creased paper, but what do you want me to write ? asks the scribe.

- Write a letter !

GAMAL EL DIN lays down his pencil.

- Please explain.

Uncle MOHAMMED replies impatiently.

- Write, man. Write whatever you please.

This time, the scribe loses his temper.

- By ALLAH... you are laughing at me. You have pulled me out of my bed to laugh at me. You want me to write a letter but you are unable to tell me what I should write in this letter.

Uncle MOHAMMED, more and more impatient, howls back :

- No importance ! I am only asking you to write a letter. Write it and state what you want in this letter. Is that clear ?

GAMAL EL DIN looks at the two men and replies in a softer tone :

- Don't be angry my friends ! You want me to write a letter, don't you ?

- yes !

- Well, to start with, I need the name and address of the man who is to receive this letter.

- It's for ABDEL HAMID, the hairdresser.

- Then you must tell me the name of the man sending this letter, asks the scribe.

- I'm sending the letter, states proudly ABOU ZEID.

- So, I shall write your name on the paper above and on the right.

The two men, astounded, watch the pencil running on the paper from right to left.

ABOU ZEID asks with curiosity.

- Where have you written my name ?

GAMAL replies patiently :

- Here above ! I've written "Osta Abou Zeid, Attarine Street, Alexandria".

ABOU ZEID is indeed happy to see his name written on the piece of paper.

Uncle MOHAMMED protests :

- My nephew. You are not here to admire your name. Scribe, proceed with your letter.

- What else shall I write ?

- Tell him that he's a fornicating son of a bitch and ask him to come here, immediately.

- Let's not complicate matters, my friends, explains Uncle MOHAMMED, soothingly. Remember that ABDEL HAMID cannot read or write, so state what you want in this letter which you will remit him with our instructions to come immediately.

GAMAL EL DIN tries to understand;

- My friends, you want ABDEL HAMID to come here immediately.

- That's it !

- And you are asking me to write just anything in his letter.

- Yes !

- Well, I refuse, says proudly the scribe.

- You refuse ? But why ? asks Uncle Mohammed apparently very disappointed.

GAMAL EL DIN answers :

- My conscience does not allow me to write such a letter !

- Why are you mixing your conscience with this business ?

- If you want me to prepare this letter, I must compose it following the usual rules.

- Well, compose scribe, invites Uncle MOHAMMED.

The scribe thinks aloud :

- This is what I shall put in my letter. I shall start this way :

"My dear ABDEL HAMID",

- There is no dear ABDEL HAMID, protests ABOU ZEID.

- Shut up, man scolds Uncle MOHAMMED.

The two men stop speaking while GAMAL EL DIN prepares the letter. At last, he stops and, writing he says :

- Now, I shall read you this letter.

Uncle MOHAMMED exclaims :

- Don't bother !

- I insist, exclaims GAMAL EL DIN. Admire the marvellous letter that I have just written.

"My dear ABDEL HAMID,

I'm leaving this week for Mecca with my Uncle MOHAMMED,"

ABOU ZEID interrupts him.

- Who is leaving for Mecca this week ?

Uncle MOHAMMED barks :

- Shut up, my nephew. Continue your letter, man.

GAMAL EL DIN continues :

"I believe that you will be happy to accompany us and in this way, benefit of the holy advantages of such a pilgrimage"

ABOU ZEID moans :

- This fornicating son of a bitch ! You want him to benefit of the holy reward bestowed by ALLAH to all pilgrims ?

- Shut up, insists again Uncle MOHAMMED. Man, continue your letter.

GAMAL EL DIN reads :

"Of course, your expenses shall be reimbursed and the only promise that I expect from you is that after your return, you will offer a gift of 10

Piasters to the Attarine Mosque as a token of thanks for the numerous holy rewards that you are to expect from this pilgrimage.

- 10 Piasters, whispers ABOU ZEID dreamily.

GAMAL EL DIN pursues his letter.

"Come immediately and give me your answer. The letter is signed ABOU ZEID

- Show me my signature !

- Are you satisfied ? asks the scribe without answering.

- Yes, states Uncle MOHAMMED. You have written a beautiful letter and I am sure that ABDEL HAMID will come immediately.

GAMAL EL DIN smiles :

- I shall show him this letter, red it to him myself and I shall come back with him.

ABOU ZEID bursts out laughing.

- By the Prophet's beard, you are indeed a useful man.

CHAPTER 8

I now believe, readers, that it is necessary for us to forget temporarily our heroes.

Today is Friday, ALLAH's holy day of rest. Let's stroll together down Attarine street.

From the roof of the Mosque, OSMAN has called long ago his faithful Moslem brothers for the morning prayer. But now the mosque is empty because it is nearly 8 o'clock.

Here are the chattering and idle men shouting happily at one another from one window to another. There are the zealous household women throwing buckets of dirty water on unlucky pedestrians.

There are not many people in the street.

But later this morning the men will wear their best stripped pyjamas and walk down the street two by two with their little fingers linked together and to glorify this holy day, they shall decorate their ear with a flavoured and coloured carnation.

Girls will cross the street in front of them in their violent satin dresses where the vivid reds will fight against the oranges as well as the golden yellows and the fluorescent pinks.

Side looks will be shot at the men and each time that a man crosses the

street alone, he will be obliged to flee shamefully followed by the jeers of the girls.

Men will only take revenge when they shall be sufficiently numerous. When this happens, daring remarks accompanied by somewhat significant gestures will rain of these weak and scared females.

For the moment, it 's only 8 o'clock in the morning and GAMAL EL DIN, the scribe, rushes along Attarine street obliged however to stop regularly to answer politely to the warm and friendly greetings of vague acquaintances. At last, he reaches ABDEL HAMID's house. The hair dresser lives on the sixth floor.

It's not so ANJOUeeable to climb six floors at this time of the day. So GAMAL EL DIN cups his hands around his mouth and yells :

- Oh ! ABDEL HAMID !

Several windows open but there is still no sign of the hair dresser. So the scribe decides to make a new effort and yells with all his might.

- Oh ! ABDEL HAMID !

This time, a window opens on the sixth floor.

- Who wants ABDEL HAMID ?

- I want you ! shouts the scribe.

- Who are you ?

- I am GAMAL EL DIN, the scribe.

This fashionable conversation does not seem to appeal to the wife of a furious neighbour who hesitates between throwing a bucket of dirty water on GAMAL EL DIN or starting a personal conversation with the scribe.

While this woman is seriously weighing in her mind these two possibilities, GAMAL EL DIN finally decides to climb the six floors.

ABDEL HAMID meets him in front of his door.

- Welcome on you, he says cordially.

The scribe answers with courtesy :

- All the pleasure of this meeting is mine.

He then follows the hairdresser in his room.

The two men squat on the floor.

ABDEL HAMID is very young and for this reason, he is not acquainted with the normal habits of a conversation. So he asks immediately :

- What do you want from me, my brother ?

GAMAL EL DIN gives him the letter.

- I have a message for you.

ABDEL HAMID examines carefully the letter.

- It's a letter... he exclaims.

- Yes !

- And this letter is for me ?

- Yes !

- Are you sure ?

The scribe bursts out laughing.

- Of course, I'm sure.

ABDEL HAMID scrutinizes once more the letter smelling it, then returning it to the scribe with an air of disgust.

- Take back your letter, oh man.

The scribe asks with curiosity.

- You are not interested to learn the contents of this letter ?

- No, thank you...

- Why ?

- Because I cannot read, admits ABDEL HAMID pitifully.

- So why don't you ask me to read this letter to you ?

- That's true. I forgot that you could read it.

- Well, this letter has been sent by Osta ABOU ZEID.

- Don't go further, says the hairdresser. I have understood !

- What have you understood if you have not read the letter.

- ABOU ZEID wants to kill me. That is what the letter says !

ABOU HAMID's voice is somewhat nervous.

GAMAL EL DIN smiles.

- No, this is not what the letter says.
- Then he asks me to marry his daughter.
- No, that's not what the letter says.

ABDEL HAMID shouts :

- Are you going to tell me what is in the letter ?
- ABOU ZEID wants to meet you this morning at his uncle's house.

ABDEL HAMID sneers :

- He's insane. I shall not go !
- Yes, you will, insists the scribe.
- I can't go this morning, I am very busy. I have to mow the son of the butcher's head, the baker's head and two goats.
- You shall go, insists the scribe because ABOU ZEID is giving you ten Pounds.
- Ten Pounds ?
- Yes, ten Pounds !
- Are you sure ?
- That's what he wrote in his letter.
- And why does this good man wish to give me ten Pounds ? asks ABDEL

HAMID. Why ? Please... explain... Perhaps he is paying me for having

fornicated with his daughter.

GAMAL smiles again :

- The letter mentions that ABOU ZEID is leaving for Mecca with his Uncle.

He is asking you to travel with him. If you ANJOUee, he shall remit you the sum of ten Pounds for you to prepare this trip which is taking place next week.

- I ANJOUee, states promptly ABDEL HAMID. Where can I find this generous man

and his ten Pounds ?

- He is presently with your Uncle.

- So let's go there together.

- But you told me a few moments ago that you were too busy !

ABDEL HAMID replies gaily :

- I'm still busy but ten Pounds have helped me to forget my other work.

Let's move on, oh scribe ! Show me the way.

And before GAMAL EL DIN changes his mind, ABDEL HAMID pushes the scribe and both men rush down the staircase.

CHAPTER 9

- Welcome on you my friends who enter my humble house, says courteously

Uncle MOHAMMED moving aside to permit ABDEL HAMID and the scribe to enter

the flat.

After a polite exchange of greetings, ABDEL HAMID asks :

- Is ABOU ZEID there ?

- Don't worry, we are expecting him in a few minutes.

- Do you smoke ? asks ABDEL HAMID offering a cigarette to Uncle MOHAMMED.

- No, thanks, answers coldly the Uncle.

During the next minutes, the three men are silent. Then, suddenly a hubbub is heard outside.

- It's ABOU ZEID who is arriving with his friends.

- With his friends ? asks nervously ABDEL HAMID.

The door opens and enters our hero followed by GABER, MUSTAPHA HAWKAT, HAG AHMED, ALY ZEIDAN and, at the rear, ALY MANSOUR.

- Welcome to you all, shouts Uncle MOHAMMED.

ABDEL HAMID straightens up, looks at ABOU ZEID then changes his mind and squats in a corner. Nobody seems to notice his presence.

The room is not very large and contains only two chairs. HAG AHMED and

Uncle MOHAMMED who are the eldest, take place on the two chairs. The others

are squatting against the wall or lying on the floor.

ABOU ZEID states :

- I met ALY ZEIDAN in the street and he insisted to join us.
- The garbage dealer is also our friend, says seriously Uncle MOHAMMED.

I am glad that he is with us. My friends, I have asked you to come here to debate with me on a very important and confidential question.

ABDEL HAMID rises :

- If you have to speak together of important matters, I shall now leave you, having myself some very important business to which I must attend to this morning.
- Sit down, orders Uncle Mohammed firmly who pursues.
- Before this interruption, I was relating to you a very important problem that we all have to face. Can I trust you ? You are all our friends, aren't you ?

ALY MANSOUR replies in a dignified way.

- I reply for all of us. We are your friends.

GAMAL EL DIN adds :

- You can count on our friendship.

The others yell :

- You are our friend. We love you, MOHAMMED.

The only abstentionist is ABDEL HAMID who remains silent looking intently at ABOU ZEID. Uncle MOHAMMED addresses his nephew :

- As you can see, you are among friends. So I shall speak.

- Speak up, invites ABOU ZEID very simply.

- Yes speak up quickly, squeaks ALY ZEIDAN.

- You are curious like a woman, notices MOHAMMED. But here is my story.

You all know that ABOU ZEID has a beautiful daughter.

- Who does not know SOHAD ? asks gaily MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, the cigarette end

picker.

But ABOU ZEID glares at him and the smile on the face of the cigarette end picker vanishes. Uncle MOHAMMED pursues :

- Well, SOHAD has faulted.

Various exclamations of amazement cover ABOU ZEID 's moan of anguish.

- With whom, asks GABER in a threatening tone looking at MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

ALY ZEIDAN points a menacing finger in the same direction.

- Did this dog deflower her ?

Uncle MOHAMMED lifts an appeasing hand.

- No, it's not him. Please be assured ?

-You must kill the fornicator, shouts ALY ZEIDAN.

ABDEL HAMID rises once more.

- I'm afraid, but I believe that I'm disturbing you in your family business.

- Sit down, orders severely Uncle MOHAMMED.

-The young man squats reluctantly in his corner.

-Uncle MOHAMMED pursues :

- So you all believe that SOHAD's seducer should be killed ?

- Yes, yells ALY ZEIDAN.

- Yes, yells gaily GABER . This seducer should be murdered by us.

- They all speak together except ABOU ZEID who looks at ABDEL HAMID, MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT finds a knife in the pocket of his gallabeya which he plants on the floor.

- This shall be my weapon. Show me the fornicator and I shall cut his throat from side to side.

But ABOU ZEID orders quietly :

- Take back your knife my friend. And Uncle MOHAMMED adds firmly :

- The seducer of SOHAD shall not be killed. We shall oblige him to marry her.

Since a few moments, ABDEL HAMID is showing all the signs of a big nervousity. He rises very suddenly :

- I shall not marry SOHAD.

ALY ZEIDAN yells :

- Then you are the fornicator of our daughters !

- No, only the fornicator of SOHAD, remarks sadly ABOU ZEID.

ALY MANSOUR shouts :

- You impure swine... last week, you tried to violate my Fatma without paying...

- It was not me who tried to violate her. It was Fatma who tried to abuse of my innocence.

ALY MANSOUR shouts :

- Hold me back my friends. Hold me back before I murder him in front of you. ABDEL HAMID shrugs his shoulders with contempt.

- Don't hold him back. I'm not afraid of him.

ALY MANSOUR whom nobody tries to hold back squats on the floor crestfallen.

Forgetting the scene, Uncle MOHAMMED suggests to ABDEL HAMID :

- You shall marry SHOHAD or you shall die !

- No, I shall not marry SOHAD ! answers stubbornly the hairdresser.

- Do you love her ? asks affectionately ABOU ZEID.

- Yes !

- Then, thunders ABOU ZEID in a terrible voice. Why do you refuse to marry

her? Answer me, you dog on the life of your mother... answer me on the life of your great grand mother also.

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT brandishes his knife.

- Let me cut the throat of this swine. Can't you notice that he is making fun of you?

ABDEL HAMID replies proudly.

- You can cut my throat if necessary but you cannot oblige me to marry SOHAD.

ABOU ZEID pursues quietly :

- Why do you refuse to marry my lovely little pigeon ?

ABDEL HAMID answers :

- Because it is impossible.

- And why it is impossible ? asks Uncle MOHAMMED.

ABDEL HAMID rises and explains :

- SOHAD has gone astray. She has dishonoured herself. So I cannot marry her.

- That's true, remarks ALY ZEIDAN. SOHAD has been deflowered and consequently she has dishonoured herself. As a result, this man cannot marry her.

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT squats discouragedly.

- This man is right. He cannot marry SOHAD.

During the next minutes, every one is silent, then HAG AHMED suggests :

- I have an idea which will allow you to marry SOHAD honorably.
- Please explain, Ya HAG !
- ABOU ZEID will accompany SOHAD to SAYEDA, the healer who will then sow a brand new virginity for her. ALLAH has inspired me this idea.
- It's a marvellous plan, nods in ANJOUement GABER.

But ABOU ZEID remarks sadly :

- Your idea cannot be used, Ya HAG !

And ABDEL HAMID confirms :

- Kill me, my friends. SOHAD is pregnant and SAYEDA, the healer, will be unable to help her with a new virginity.

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT draws his knife once more and rises menacingly :

- Stop man, orders Uncle MOHAMMED. I have another solution to solve the problem.
- What are you thinking of ? asks ABOU ZEID
- Tell us, questions feverishly ABDEL HAMID.
- My idea is that ABOU ZEID shall pay a dowry to ABDEL HAMID in exchange of this marriage.
- A dowry ? repeats happily ABDEL HAMID.
- A dowry ? moans ABOU ZEID with despair.

- Yes, a dowry, insists Uncle MOHAMMED.
- A dowry of which amount asks practically ALY ZEIDAN.
- A dowry of 200 Pounds, suggests Uncle MOHAMMED.
- 200 Pounds, moans ABOU ZEID ? Where can I find such a big sum ?
- 200 Pounds ? groans ABDEL HAMID but my conscience ? What shall I do with
my conscience ?
- Your conscience is worth 200 Pounds, states firmly Uncle MOHAMMED.
- That's true, says GABER. Your conscience is worth 200 Pounds.
- But what about my honour ? moans ABDEL HAMID ... If you are paying 200
Pounds for my conscience, what are you paying for my honour ?
- Look here, remarks HAG AHMED, your conscience and your honour are not
worth 200 Pounds together.
- Then, how much are they worth ? asks ABDEL HAMID hopefully
- Not more than 50 Pounds a piece, and this is very well paid ! states HAG
AHMED very severely..
- And the other 100 Pounds mentioned by Uncle MOHAMMED ? asks
pitifully
the hairdresser.
- You shall offer this amount to the Attarine Mosque for Bairam.
- To the Attarine Mosque ? asks sadly ABDEL HAMID.

- Yes, to the Attarine Mosque ! replies firmly the HAG. This way not only shall your pockets be full with your magnificent dowry but you will have saved both your conscience and your honour. In addition, you shall please ALLAH and the Prophet with your holy donation of 100 Pounds.

ABDEL HAMID, convinced, yells :

- Then I accept..... I accept to marry SOHAD.

ABOU ZEID stands up moved :

- Kiss me, my son. Come into my arms.

And between two kisses, he states to the others :

- I had a daughter. Now I still have a daughter but I also have a son and perhaps to morrow a grand son...

Everybody laughs and as usual, MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT releases a smelly fart.

Which is unnoticed because of the general joy of this assembly.

Suddenly GAMAL EL DIN very practical remarks :

- But the 200 Pounds ? where are you going to find such a large sum ?

Uncle MOHAMMED scratches his head.

- It's true ! I had forgotten about this detail. I cannot lend you this sum or even part of it, having invested my last profits in my trip to Mecca

! Where shall I find the 200 Pounds?

- Perhaps that we can borrow them, asks hopefully ABOU ZEID.

- No one will lend us such sum and remember that none of us except Uncle

MOHAMMED and perhaps ALY MANSOUR have ever seen in their whole life such an

important sum of money. All the eyes now fix ABOU ZEID who is still holding

the hairdresser in his arms but suddenly ABDEL HAMID recoils whilst ABOU

ZEID thunders :

- Don't come near me, you dirty fornicator !

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT grasps his knife which he points out at the hairdresser's

throat and growls :

- I shall kill you seducer of our daughters.

- Cut his throat, barks ABOU ZEID excitedly.

- No, stop ! You must not kill him.

- Why, asks ALY ZEIDAN in a shrill voice.

Uncle MOHAMMED answers quietly :

- Because if we kill the hairdresser, no one will marry SOHAD.

- That's true, confirms the HAG. Who shall marry SOHAD if we kill ABDEL

HAMID ?

- Then, the only solution is that the hairdresser marries you daughter.

- But what about the 200 Pounds ?

- We shall have to find the 200 Pounds, decrees Uncle MOHAMMED.

- Where shall we find them ?

The HAG suggests :

- Let's prepare a collect...

Uncle MOHAMMED laughs

- A collect between us will not give more than one Piaster !

- Perhaps a collect at the mosque ? suggests hopefully ABDEL HAMID.

- You are joking ! no collect in the mosque will give more than one

Pound. and in addition, remember that part of the 200 Pounds are to be donated to the Attarine Mosque for the Bairam festival.

- Then let's prepare another swindle.

- No ! answers Uncle MOHAMMED. The peasants are more and more wary and a

swindle against them will never give a profit of 200 Pounds and also will take too long to organize.

- Then what can we do ? asks ABOU ZEID desperately.

Nobody answers. Then Uncle MOHAMMED jumps up from his chair.

- I've found !

ABOU ZEID questions :

- Speak up Uncle ! where can we find the 200 Pounds for SOHAD's dowry ?

- Of which 100 Pounds shall be for the Mosque of Attarine, completes

obligingly HAG AHMED.

- If we cannot kill ABDEL HAMID who is the only man who can marry SOHAD ?

We have to search for another man to murder. A man who has sufficient money

to pay us 200 Pounds. My idea is simple, isn't it ?

- Who is this man, asks GABER ? who shall we murder ? personally, I do not know anybody who owns 200 Pounds.

- I know somebody ! announces proudly Uncle MOHAMMED.

Everybody looks at him.

- He's a man who carries always large sums of money in his pocket.

- Show me this man, asks MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT carressing affectionately the blade of his knife.

- Are you thinking of BOUTROS, the coptic school teacher ?

- No, answers Uncle MOHAMMED, BOUTROS is honest, therefore poor.

- Who is he ? asks HAG AHMED with curiosity.

- Are you thinking of HARALAMBO the greek grocer ? are you suggesting that we prepare a robbery of his stores ?

- No absolutely not. The grocer's shop is in front of the police station.

Uncle MOHAMMED then suggests :

- My friends, I am not thinking of BOUTROS or HARALAMBO !

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT snarls in a sinister tone.

- Man... are you going to speak up or not ?
- Listen Uncle MOHAMMED, my friends .
- We shall kill ISAAC the Jew, announces Uncle MOHAMMED.
- That's a wonderful idea, states ALY ZEIDAN.
- ISAAC ? asks GABER.
- ISAAC? asks ABOU ZEID but he is our friend. We all like him
- That's the idea, explains patiently Uncle MOHAMMED. We all like him. He is our friend. He loves us and for this reason, he shall not be too angry against us if we murder him. You do all understand of course ?
- You are right, answers HAG AHMED for everybody.

ABOU ZEID asks :

- How shall we proceed ?
- This is my plan, explains Uncle MOHAMMED. This is my plan to murder ISAAC and during the following minutes, he describes to his friends the complete details of the plan to murder ISAAC.
- Now, my friends, concludes Uncle MOHAMMED, I must ask you to leave. The intellectual strain caused by this plan requires a few hours sleep. So after about half an hour of the usual salamalecs extended in the staircase, the members of this honourable assembly separate in order to prepare conveniently the murder of ISAAC, the celebrated marriage broker.

CHAPTER 10

Friday evening, towards 6 o'clock, the night chosen for ISAAC's murder, only two people are sitting in Abdallah's coffee place. One is HANAFI, the baker's assistant. The other man is HAMIDO, the butcher's aid.

These two men are not very important for our story. As a matter of fact, they are so busy by their relentless game of backgammon that they are unable to pay attention to anything else including the other customers of this coffee place who will soon arrive.

For the moment, one can watch Abdallah appearing with two glasses of mint tea with two spoons planted in the sugar filling at least half the glasses.

Then appears GABER who pauses at the threshold of the coffee place. He asks :

- Have you seen ISAAC the jew ?

But nobody answers and the two men are more than ever busy with their backgammon game. GABER enters the coffee and finds a seat far away from the two players.

A few moments later appears MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT who joins GABER and asks him

immediately.

- Have you seen ISAAC the jew ?

- No, answers GABER, I arrived only a few moments ago.

- And the cart ? Have you found a convenient cart ?

- Yes, I 've found the cart which is already waiting in front of ABOU

ZEID's house.

- That's marvellous, exclaims benevolently GABER... You know of course

that you shall be obliged to carry the trunk and its contents from Attarine street to the canal Mahmoudieh.

- I know moans GABER, its a very long trip of over 10 miles.

- Don't complain. This is your part of the deal.

GABER shakes his head. He seems very nervous and asks.

- What about the knife ? Have you brought the knife ?

CHAWKAT grins sinisterly :

- I 've brought the knife and it's well sharpened.

- Aren't you afraid ?

CHAWKAT shrugs his shoulders and answers sardonically :

- Afraid ! you are trying to jeer !

GABER whispers hastily :

- Don't be angry with me my brother. I 'm only joking.

A diversion is created by the arrival of ALY ZEIDAN who asks in his shrill voice :

- Well, my friends have you seen ISAAC the jew ?
- Not yet, answers MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT winking at the two men.

GABER asks :

- Usually he 's always here towards 6 o'clock.
- Don't worry, begs ALY ZEIDAN. He shall arrive very soon. By the way, here comes ABOU ZEID. Welcome on you, man !

The newcomer sits silently beside the three men :

- What's wrong with you my brother ? asks MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.
- Nothing ! answers ABOU ZEID gloomily.
- Are you not happy of our friendship ?
- Yes, my friends, nods affirmatively ABOU ZEID.

But his gloomy face denies these words.

- Are you afraid ?

And ABOU ZEID thunders in a terrible voice :

- You will learn that the bull of Attarine is only scared by ALLAH and by the Prophet's beard.

The two men playing backgammon leap up startled but they do not move their

eyes from the backgammon board.

ABOU ZEID confesses in a lower tone :

- I would prefer that the whole matter be already settled.

- Have you changed your mind ? asks ALY ZEIDAN.

- No ! tonight we shall murder ISAAC the jew.

- Then, what's bothering you man ?

- But ABOU ZEID does not answer this question and is still lost in his

bleak thoughts. HAG MOHAMMED and ALY MANSOUR then arrive and shout from the

door of the coffee place :

- Is ISAAC there ?

This time, HANAFI stops playing backgammon and questions with curiosity.

- Why is everybody asking if ISAAC the jew has arrived ?

But he doesn't even await the answer to his question and continues his

backgammon game. During this time, his partner HAMIDO has not lifted his eyes from the backgammon board.

- I have the trunk ! whispers HAG AHMED.

- Is it large enough ? asks ALY MANSOUR.

And his voice is loud enough to reach HANAFI who asks :

- What are you speaking of, my friends ?

He then laughs and states with a smile :

- I bet that you are speaking of women. I'm sure that you are speaking of

ALY MANSOUR's Fatma. A tall and beautiful girl with a body that will drive

you insane and also keep you dreaming during day time.

Everybody laughs except HAMIDO who is still studying with great attention the backgammon board.

ALY MANSOUR hurls at him :

- My Fatma is not for a man as broke as you are !

But HANAFI is no more there. He is now preparing a vey difficult move requiring his full attention.

- What about the trunk, whispers GABER.

- What do you want to know about the trunk ? asks the HAG in a subdued voice.

- Where is it ?

- I left it in ABOU ZEID's house ! mutters the HAG AHMED.

- Perfect ! nods MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

ALY MANSOUR asks :

- Do you believe that it is big enough ?

- Yes, of course. Don't worry my friend !

But ALY MANSOUR still needs to be reassured, so he questions :

- What is the size of your trunk ?

- This is none of your business, grumbles Uncle MOHAMMED.

- On your life, begs ALY MANSOUR, please give me the measurements of this trunk.

- You are annoying me, you dwarf ! shouts ABOU ZEID.
- On your life HAG, tell me the measurements of this trunk !
- 1,50 m, announces conciliatorily the HAG in order to close the discussion.
- You see !!! exclaims triumphantly ALY MANSOUR. I knew it all the time.

Your trunk is too small !

- Why ? asks GABER what are the measurements of the corpse ?

ABOU ZEID answers abruptly.

- When the corpse arrives, you shall ask him !

ALY MANSOUR murmurs baffled :

- In my opinion, the corpse measures at least 1,60 m. If this is the case, how can we pack him in such a small truck ?

HAG AHMED answers suavely :

- You shall fold him !

But ALY MANSOUR is not completely convinced and remains thoughtful.

GABER turns to ABOU ZEID and questions :

- So what about the preparation ?
- ZEINAB is working since this morning. We have bought four hens and I can promise you all the best melohia of your life. It is really a pity that

Uncle MOHAMMED cannot be present for this rejoicing.

ALY ZEIDAN surprised asks :

- Then you uncle will not be with us ?

ALY MANSOUR who is still pondering over the size of the trunk as well as the measurement of the corpse, remains silent.

HAG AHMED nods :

- The holy man has probably left for Mecca.

- Yes, answers ABOU ZEID. He finally left for Mecca this morning advising me that he would return in time for the engagement party of SOHAD and ABDEL

HAMID.

- I'm sorry to inform you that under such conditions I am no more interested by the murder of our friend ISAAC the jew.

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT growls his hand groping for the knife in his pocket.

- Why aren't you interested ?

ALY ZEIDAN answers in his shrill voice :

- I have so decided !

ALLAH is lenient because neither HAMIDO or HANAFI move and they remain concentrated in their thrilling backgammon game.

- This morning we ANJOUed together on this murder. Uncle MOHAMMED was to be

present. And now, he has disappeared.

- Under such conditions, you want me to be part of this plot ?

- Yes we insist ! threatens ABOU ZEID with a horrible smile.

- Yes ! confirms MUSTAPHA touching the knife in his pocket. You know too much to change your mind.

- In that case, I accept ! exclaims ALY ZEIDAN apparently slightly frightened. I shall help you to murder ISAAC the jew.

After a few moments silence, he adds :

- But please, tell me what is my profit in this business where the only winner seems to be ABOU ZEID and his family. Please, my friends explain !

HANAFI,who has heard the beginning of the sentence, cries out :

- You are right, my friends. What is our profit nowadays ? Life is very hard and many are dying of hunger under the rule of our glorious GAMAL ABDEL NASSER. May ALLAH call him at his side in company of the Prophet !!!

- All of us do not have the muscles of ABOU ZEID or the wives of ALY MANSOUR to cope with such a situation ! admits GABER

No answer being expected from the player of backgammon and as it is his turn to play, HANAFI concentrates on the game.

- What can I serve you ? ABDALLAH has appeared so suddenly before our heroes that they leap us somewhat startled.

The HAG answers :

- We don't want anything for the moment. We are all waiting for ISAAC the jew.

And he adds generously :

- When ISAAC arrives, I'll offer him a double glass of mint tea.

- He didn't leave you a message ?

- No, but he's expected at any moment.

Is he used to arrive so late ? asks anxiously ABOU ZEID.

- Not usually, replies ABDALLAH disappearing into his kitchen.

- What time is it ? asks GABER.

HAG AHMED rolls up his gallabeya and after searching in his pockets declares :

- Unfortunately, I've left my watch at home.

- Your watch! sneers ALY ZEIDAN... Since when do you have a watch ?

The HAG throws at him a look full of hatred.

GABER calms them down.

- I beg of you. Don't quarrel ! my friends. Remember that we must prepare ourselves for this evening.

- This evening, sneers once more ALY ZEIDAN. What shall be our profit ?

- A wonderful meal ! promises ABOU ZEID.

- We are helping a friend !

Everybody approves.

GABER who has a tender heart asks :

- Don't you regret murdering such a good friend as ISAAC ? We all like him.

- I ANJOUee, approves the HAG, but we cannot do otherwise.

- Remember, adds ABOU ZEID that if ISAAC is not killed, we shall be unable to find our 200 Pounds for the dowry.

- And for the donation to the Attarine mosque, completes the HAG. Now I think that you exaggerate slightly when you describe ISAAC as a friend.

Remember he is an old man who has not a very long time to live in any case. And his money will prove useful not only for the dowry but also for the Attarine mosque donation.

- And he has no children, completes ALY MANSOUR who has now forgotten the

size of the trunk.

- I'm sure that he suffers seriously not to have any children states MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT and I shall end these sufferings.

GABER is still not totally convinced and insists :

- And if ISAAC doesn't know how much he is unhappy ?

- We know the answer to that question, concludes ALY ZEIDAN and that's the most important for him and for us !

Suddenly GAMAL EL DIN appears outside the window of the coffee shop. He calls them and is soon surrounded by his friends.

- I'm sorry but I cannot join you inside.
- Why ? asks the HAG.
- The reason is that I have seen in this coffee HANAFI, the baker attendant.
- What do you fear my friend ?
- Well, I prefer to wait outside. I have told you my story with the baker who trusted me with a ten pound note to be changed...
- We know this story.
- So I cannot enter this coffee place but I've prepared the letter for Mrs Sarah.
- What does this letter say ? asks ALY MANSOUR.
- We all know the contents of this letter, states ABOU ZEID impatiently.
This letter is from ISAAC to his wife mentioning his departure for Israël this evening.
- It's a marvellous idea, states the HAG. For the Egyptian government, Israël doesn't exist. In other words, ISAAC cannot leave for a country which does not exist and I believe that Mrs Sarah will not be able to lodge a complaint against us with the police.
- I have understood ! exclaims intelligently ALY MANSOUR and he asks :
- Are you sure oh scribe that the handwriting of this letter is correctly imitated ?

- ISAAC should be mistaken himself, answers proudly GAMAL EL DIN.
Remember

that I'm the most famous forger in the Middle East and that one day, I imitated the seal of RAMSES II on a parchment which is kept preciously today in the biggest London museum. A story goes around that the stupid Englishmen pay every day large sums of money just to look at this parchment.

- Well, answers impatiently ABOU ZEID we all know your RAMSES II story.

So, you've prepared the letter ?

- Yes, I have placed it in a envelope.

- You know exactly how to proceed !

- Yes of course ! I shall await outside your house. Then, when ISAAC arrives and enters your apartment, I shall rush to Sarah's house and remit the letter to his widow...

- Telling her that ISAAC gave you this letter for her. She will not show it to anybody fearing problems with the police which always happen when Israël is mentioned.

- That's all ? asks GAMAL EL DIN;

- Yes, that's all. You shall then wait in your house and join us after remitting the letter to Mrs Sarah.

- No, that's not all ! exclaims ALY MANSOUR.

- What else is there to mention ?

- Tell me, oh GAMAL, begs ALY MANSOUR in his shrill voice. Tell me what are the measurements of ISAAC's corpse ?

The scribe cannot find time to answer this question as ALY MANSOUR is dragged immediately inside the coffee shop. They then sit down together at their table on the further side of the coffee place.

- What time is it ? asks once more MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

GABER shakes his head pessimistically.

- ISAAC may not come today...

- Ayou... moans ABOU ZEID and ZEINAB's dinner is prepared since this morning.

- ISAAC shall come. I have prayed this morning at the Attarine Mosque for his arrival this evening in this coffee shop, friends... ALLAH has heard our prayers. Here is ISAAC the jew, our friend !

Everybody leaps up and surrounds ISAAC who frightened steps back.

The HAG yells :

- ABDALLAH.... bring double mint tea for ISAAC.

- We shall eat it ourselves, suggests GABER.

The HAG predicts :

- Long life to ISAAC, blunders heartily MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

- What's going on, my friends ? asks ISAAC who needs apparently to be reassured.
- We all love you , exclaims ALY ZEIDAN with tears in his eyes.
- You're our friend, states GABER.
- How much have you earned today ? asks ALY MANSOUR.
- Why are you asking such a question ? Do you need a loan ?
- No ! mentions the HAG, we do not require a loan.
- No, states MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, we never borrow.
- No, confirms ABOU ZEID. On the contrary, we are cashing very soon an important sum of money.
- That's fine, exclaims ISAAC more calmly.
- Sit down at our table, suggests the HAG.

HANAFI and HAMIDO are still playing their backgammon contest and do not lift their eyes during this scene. ISAAC sits down in front of the glass of mint tea placed before him by ABDALLAH.

- You are indeed good friends !
- We love you, says ABOU ZEID very moved.
- How much do you measure ? asks innocently ALY MANSOUR.
- Why do you ask such a question ? asks ISAAC.
- For nothing, answers ALY MANSOUR looking downwards.

- Tonight, you are dining at my house, announces ABOU ZEID.

- Tonight, answers ISAAC, I cannot come.

- You can... you can, insists GABER.

- My friends, my very good friends, I have been working very hard today. I am exhausted and my only wish is to fall asleep and never wake up.

- Don't worry, ISAAC, whispers ALY ZEIDAN, your wish shall be fulfilled very quickly.

But HAG AHMED sends under the table a terrible kick on the shins of ALY MANSOUR. Let 's add that ALLAH is indeed merciful as the dangerous remark is not heard by ISAAC the jew.

ABOU ZEID insists :

- You 're my friend and you must come this evening and have dinner with us.

- I can't. Perhaps that you can invite me some other evening.

- Without your presence, there will be no reason for this supper.

- If you don't come, ISAAC, I shall cancel my invitation for the

"imminent- engagement" of my daughter SOHAD with ABDEL HAMID, the hairdresser.

- Instead of inviting us for the "imminent-engagement" of you daughter, why don't you wait to invite us for their effective engagement.? asks ISAAC.

- It's an old habit in Zagazig where only imminent-engagements are celebrated, stutters the HAG.

- If you don't come, I shall cancel the whole invitation and ZEINAB shall be very angry having worked since this morning to prepare a wonderful feast. We have in this moment four hens swimming in a basin of melohia. You will love this very special treat.

- I'm sure, answers ISAAC politely.

- They all yell together :

- Then we can count on you ?

But ISAAC shakes his head :

- I'm sorry, I can't come !

- If you come, promises generously ABOU ZEID, you shall be the spectator of a wonderful belly dance performed specially for you by my wife ZEINAB.

- I shall sing also a beautiful song for you, suggests GABER.

- We don't want to hear your song, snarls ABOU ZEID;

GABER looks away visibly upset.

- You are not nice with me, my friends. You never let me sing.

- And who else will dance apart ZEINAB ?

- I shall dance, answers proudly ABOU ZEID.

- Do you have drums ?

- Yes !

- In this case, says gaily ALY MANSOUR, I shall also dance after supper.

- So will I, promises MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT. I shall dance in the honour of our guest ISAAC the jew.

- You see, ISAAC, you cannot refuse this invitation which in fact is in your honour.

- But my wife ? wails ISAAC half convinced.

- GAMAL EL DIN, the scribe, is outside this coffee place. We shall ask him to call on Sarah, advising her that you will return home very late this evening...

- Very very late, specifies more accurately ALY ZEIDAN with his shrill voice.

Facing such friendliness, ISAAC can only surrender with a smile. He is also moved to note that he still has true friends who prize so much his friendship.

They all leave the coffee place.

ALY MANSOUR grabs ISAAC's arm in a very friendly way.

- If you are interested, I can offer you before supper, a free visit to my wife Fatma.

- No thanks, answers politely ISAAC more and more moved.

They cross the street and meet GAMAL EL DIN.

During this time, the two players in the coffee shop continues their backgammon contest. At a certain moment, HANAFI notices :

- Everybody has left. They have all gone !

And for the first time this evening, HAMIDO stops playing and asks :

- Have you noticed that this coffee place has been empty all evening ?

It's strange, isn't it ?

Then immediately after these words, the two men concentrate on the backgammon board and continue their game.

CHAPTER 11

GAMAL EL DIN hastens along Attarine street and soon reaches the building where ISAAC lives with his wife Sarah.

He feels anxious and hesitates a long time before climbing the stairs.

Finally, reassembling his faltering courage, he knocks at the door.

- Mrs Sarah COHEN...

- Yes !

- Open the door, please Mrs SARAH.

- Who are you ?

GAMAL EL DIN notes that although the door is ajar, a chain forbids the entry to the flat.

The scribe shudders with fright when he sees two scared eyes goggling at him.

- I'm GAMAL EL DIN the scribe. He shutters but the scared eyes do no seem to recognize him. He stammers :

- You know me, Mrs Sarah! I 'm your neighbour and every day I see you hanging your clothes outside your window.

This time the two eyes blink. The scribe continues in a reassuring voice :

- Don't be scared, Mrs Sarah ! Open the door !

The two blinking eyes disappear for a moment during which GAMAL EL DIN

wonders if the door shall finally be opened.

Then he hears the clinking of the chain which is withdrawn.

- Enter, Oh GAMAL this house is yours.

GAMAL EL DIN stares at the chubby ass guiding him to the drawing room and is obliged to make a serious effort to hold back his hands and refrain from slapping cheerfully the beautiful round buttocks swaying left and right in front of him as if they were guided by some lively music.

GAMAL EL DIN thinks :

- Our friend ISAAC the jew is indeed lucky. If I were married to a woman as beautiful as Sarah, I would spend all my nights between her legs instead of losing my time elsewhere.

But such a thought is indeed improper and GAMAL EL DIN realizes that

Such thoughts can drag him much further than his plans to day. So he pinches himself violently to eliminate the lecherous ideas swarming in his mind. He yells :

-Ouïe... oh.... aïe !!!

- What's wrong with you, oh GAMAL ? asks Mrs Sarah kindly.

- Nothing is wrong, answers GAMAL EL DIN, trying not to stare too much at the lavish bosom trembling in front of him like a plate of jelly.

- You have come to see my husband, asks Sarah. He 's expected to arrive at

any moment.

GAMAL doesn't answer. His hand is in his pocket crumpling the letter.

- Would you like a cup of tea ?

And although the polite refusal of the scribe, the woman helps him to take place in ISAAC's favourite armchair and then disappears in the kitchen.

GAMAL is left alone. He touches for a moment the soft cushions on which he can snuggle comfortably. Then he stands up. The armchair is too smooth and he could easily fall asleep. So he sits on a chair parking one quarter of his behind on one half of the chair and his naked feet are almost hidden under the table.

GAMAL would certainly have preferred squatting on the glowing red carpet thrown carelessly on the floor in the middle of the room.

SARAH returns with two steaming tea cups :

- This is yours, oh GAMAL ! I've put plenty sugar in your cup.

The scribe cannot help thinking :

" My beautifull pigeon round and sweet ! I bet that your bosom is sweeter than your cup of tea"

But this is a very bold thought and GAMAL cannot find sufficient courage to submit this conclusion to Sarah. So for the moment, he merely dips his spoon in the tea watching at the same time a fly strolling around the saucer.

- Are you happy with your business, oh GAMAL ?

The scribe shows an emotionless face.

- ALLAH be blessed !!!

And he stares at Mrs Sarah from the corner of his eye. He has not yet drunk his tea and to be quite frank, GAMAL EL DIN is deeply shocked to notice that Mrs Sarah has drunk her tea very silently without the usual noisy good manners.

GAMAL EL DIN thinks : "My plump pigeon, you want to know if I'm satisfied with my business. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you that my most important business is ISAAC, the marriage broker".

- With all these strangers leaving Egypt with their passports and various certificates required, I believe that you must be very busy, ya GAMAL.

The scribe smiles politely and thinks ; "you are more than right, Mrs Sarah and very soon we shall find ourselves alone. Do you believe that it's amusing to embezzle each other when all the strangers have left "?

- You are becoming a rich man, notices Mrs Sarah.

- Perhaps, answers shyly GAMAL.

- And you are planning to marry, continues Mrs Sarah.

- Who ? me ? asks the scribe. Then he bursts out laughing looking at the alarmed face of Mrs Sarah who questions :

- If you do not wish to marry, why have you come here to meet ISAAC this evening ?

GAMAL caresses his whiskers advantageously.

- Who told you that I've come to meet your husband ?

Mrs Sarah does not feel at ease. She asks suspiciously :

- Then, what do you want ?

GAMAL EL DIN hesitates still caressing his whiskers.

Sarah insists severely :

- Why do you come to this house when my husband is not there ?

GAMAL raises his eyes to the ceiling and answers very foolishly :

- Ayou, Mrs Sarah. I believe that you are imagining horrible things concerning my presence here tonight.

And suddenly he trusts the letter at Mrs Sarah.

- I have a letter for you !

- Who wrote this letter ? asks Sarah roughly.

- Your husband, ISAAC, answers graciously GAMAL EL DIN. Do you want me to read you this letter ?

- No, thank you, answers Sarah in a softer tone. But why is he sending me a letter ? I've been waiting for him since over two hours.

- It's my fault, exclaims the scribe. This letter was given to me earlier

this afternoon but I was busy and could not bring it before.

While he is speaking, the scribe watches Mrs Sarah taking out the letter from the envelope, reading it, then falling on the sofa slapping her face continuously.

GAMAL EL DIN asks innocently :

- Anything wrong ? Can I help you ?

But Mrs Sarah moans with despair without answering. Then after a few moments, she gets hold of the letter and reads it once more. When she can speak, at last she stammers :

- Did ISAAC give you this letter ?

-The scribe answers immediately :

- Yes, of course ! I testify that ISAAC your husband himself wrote this letter in my presence. He told me that he was in a hurry and asked me to remit you this message very urgently. Are you pleased with the news brought by this letter ?

- Yes ! answers Mrs Sarah in a dying voice, I am happy !

GAMAL EL DIN stands up and asks politely :

- Do you require anything else ?

- No thanks, moans Mrs Sarah.

And she gasps :

- Excuse me if I'm now obliged to ask you to leave.

GAMAL EL DIN hesitates and finds that collapsing in the sofa, Mrs Sarah is more tempting than ever. But regretting such thoughts, he tears himself away from Mrs Sarah's flat.

And it is only when he reaches the front door of the building that he hears an alarmed cry :

- Oh GAMAL !

He lifts his head :

- What's wrong ?

- Well, yells Mrs Sarah, this letter that you brought, are you sure that ISAAC wrote it ?

- I'm sure ! yells back GAMAL

Then he adds somewhat uneasily :

- But why are you asking such a question ? Haven't you recognized the handwriting of your husband ?

- Yes ! answers Mrs Sarah, I recognize it !

- Then, what is worrying you ? cries GAMAL slightly reassured.

- The problem is, yells Mrs Sarah, that I have noticed a mistake in the spelling of our name COEN written with an "h" while COEN is normally written without an "h".

GAMAL EL DIN has no answer to give and rushes down Attarine street towards

ABOU ZEID's flat where ZEINAB is preparing herself to receive her guests

CHAPTER 12

ZEINAB has worked conscientiously all day preparing the scenery of ISAAC's murder. As a matter of fact, ABOU ZEID's instructions have been followed literally and the bull of Attarine shall surely be quite satisfied and so will be ISAAC, spending joyously the last evening of his life. Thus shall be proved to him the friendship of his companions as well as the proof or their love which shall accompany him up to the end of his life. For everybody including the victim this murder shall be a true pleasure party.

ZEINAB looks around her.

The room where the guests shall dine has been washed with numerous buckets

of water and a certain number of cushions borrowed from obliging neighbours

strew the floor in a skilful disorder.

Four hens are simmering gaily since this morning in a tasty melohia.

Pyramids of white rice placed in front of the basement window flatter the greedy eye of the strollers.

ZEINAB is grateful to notice that ALLAH is indeed merciful. He has given her two weapons to offer a double orgasm to her guests. First orgasm resulting from her marvellous cooking and second, but not least, obtained

from her indoubtable charm as an accomplished hostess.

The broken mirror in the kitchen reflects the picture of a handsome matron aged around fifty years. And if it were not for a toothless mouth and her breasts deflated like old tyres, ZEINAB would still be admired for her royal bearing.

As a matter of fact, completely deloused since early this morning, abundantly sprayed with musk and with her magnificent lemon yellow dress purchased this afternoon from the shop "Elegantia" in Attarine street, ZEINAB will surely attract the attention of all her guests.

ZEINAB sucks her rotten stumps with a mischievous tongue. Thirty years ago, this gesture would have broken numerous hearts !

As she has still some time to spend before the arrival of her guests, she can still blacken the rotten stumps of her teeth with betel and also shade her eyelids with kohl. This treatment shall make them as langorous as the eyes of a cow.

ZEINAB chuckles joyously whilst finishing the preparation of her appearance. She pictures the concupiscent looks of her guests and trembles with joy and passion, dreaming that after the departure of the last guest, when ISAAC shall be lying cold in the trunk, ABOU ZEID will carry her, his bride warm and excite to their matrimonial straw mattress... and

with expert hands, he will undress her as quickly as possible...

- "Ayou", thinks ZEINAB, already nearly swooning in anticipation, " tonight I shall be not only a mother and a hostess but also a bride for my ABOU ZEID" !

Then ZEINAB tears herself away from the broken mirror, lifts the top of the saucepan releasing the strong and sticky smell of the melohia which crosses the kitchen, then reaches the street tickling pleasantly the noses of the happy strollers.

GOMAA the sweeper is leaning against the basement window with his nostrils quivering with joy, eating with appetite his dry bread and sniffing at the same time delicately the strong aroma of the melohia without losing sight at the same moment of the pyramids of white rice artistically modeled.

GOMAA is satisfied because he has managed to satisfy together not only his sight but also his taste and his keen sense of smells.

Unfortunately from the kitchen ZEINAB has heard the noisy burping accompanying this feast and she yells angrily.

- Man.... What are you doing in front of my window ? Go away and eat your bread further.

The sweeper looks at her with tears in his eyes.

- Oh you, the most beautiful of all beauties... I beg you to let me finish my meal perfumed by the smell of your melohia.

Slightly calmed down, nevertheless ZEINAB yells :

- This feast for kings is not for a shabby flea ridden man like you. Even its smell is not for you.

GOMAA the sweeper throws a last tragic look through the basement window, smells a last puff of melohia, then moves away sadly muttering between his teeth :

- Life is indeed like a cucumber, sometimes in your hand but most of the time in your ass !

ZEINAB has heard these words and thinks gaily : "Tonight, the cucumber shall be in my hand" and she smiles to herself a last time.

She is now ready for an evening which will be described during the years to come as the most fashionable event of the present decade.

CHAPTER 13

ZEINAB cheeps gaily bowing and smiling heartily.

- Enter, my friends. What an honour for our humble home !

ISAAC comes in with ABOU ZEID on one side and ALY MANSOUR on the other.

The first one holds him by his shoulder, the second has linked his small finger to ISAAC's finger.

- "These men are good friends but perhaps slightly clingy" mutters ISAAC.

The others hustle joyously in the rear, but very soon the smell of the melohia reaches them from the kitchen and the hustle becomes a savage stampede.

After this terrible turmoil which can be described as a tidal wave, ISAAC slightly shaken, finds himself still framed by his two affectionate but watchfull friends.

The others have already entered the flat. ISAAC bows respectfully and says to the frilly matron :

- Your husband has been kind enough to invite me to your celebration this evening.

ZEINAB simpers :

- Without your presence, oh ISAAC, no celebration would have taken place this evening !

- You are too good, answers ISAAC

Then ZEINAB disappears, replaced by the three men entering the flat.

ALY MANSOUR is admiring a huge trunk occupying the greatest part of the room. He evaluates the size of this trunk for a long moment, then shrugs his shoulders apparently discouraged.

The others are surrounding the basin of melohia which is sending spicy smells through the room.

HAG AHMED whose eyes are bulging with pleasure, calls ABOU ZEID.

- Come and see, oh ABOU ZEID, what ZEINAB has prepared for us !

And impatiently he dips his finger in the unctious soup.

ABOU ZEID scolds him in a fatherly way.

- Oh HAG ... you are forgetting your good manners.

But the holy man doesn't hear, as if he had left them for another world.

His finger in his mouth and his eyes revulsed, he stutters totally ravished :

- Ayou my friends !... This melohia is excellent. By ALLAH, it is better than excellent ! I have never tasted in my whole life such a wonderful melohia... A present from the Prophet !

And while he continues to keep a close eye on the melohia, ZEINAB still cooing, walks among the guests.

ALY MANSOUR has stopped examining the trunk and whispers in GABER'ear :

- Have you smelt the wonderful perfume of this woman ?

The cart hauler answers astonished.

- The only thing that I can smell is musc associated with garlic. Do you like such a smell ?

ALY MANSOUR looks at the ceiling.

- This is an exhilarating smell. Do you know what this smell reminds me ?

- A dead rat, replies GABER.

- No, no ! protests the garbage man. This perfume is the smell of my Fatma the night of our wedding.

- Who is speaking of death ? asks cheerfully MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

GABER has a far away glance in his eye. As for ALY MANSOUR, he is too busy to answer, shooting devastating looks at ZEINAB who blushes like a young virgin.

- Are you drunk, man ? barks the cigarette end picker.

- Of course not ! denies ALY MANSOUR. I have not smoked a single puff of haschich in my narghile. But please, admit that ZEINAB is indeed very attractive.

During this time, ISAAC is chatting pleasantly with his hostess.

- Where are the lovebirds ? he asks.

- In the frying pan, answers ZEINAB who has not understood the question.

- I 'm speaking of "the -imminent-engaged-couple" corrects ISAAC smiling.
- They have gone for a walk, precises vaguely ABOU ZEID.
- They are killing time before their wedding, informs GABER laughing like a friction of marbles in a bag.

Everybody smiles good humouredly, except CHAWKAT who thinks with a sinister face : "they are killing time while I'm preparing to murder ISAAC".

- Is this trunk for their honeymoon, asks ISAAC leniently.

ALY MANSOUR cups his hand over his ear very interested and asks :

- It's a beautiful trunk ? Don't you think so ?
- Beautiful, but perhaps too large and uncomfortable ... replies ISAAC.
- For me, replies ALY MANSOUR, this trunk should have an extra 10 cm length.
- This trunk is large enough, yells ABOU ZEID who spits angrily. The saliva reaches CHAWKAT and splutters on his cheek forming a greasy stream of yellow smelly thick liquid.
- Well aimed ! cries ALY MANSOUR while CHAWKAT rubs away the saliva with his bare hands which he, then, wipes tidily on his gallabeya.

In order to create a diversion, the HAG asks with his face beaming with pleasure :

- When do we eat, oh friends ?

ZEINAB, nearly stumbling, arrives with the enormous basin of melohia which she places carefully in the middle of the room on the floor. Everybody is already squatting on the cushions with their legs crossed. Of course, the place of honour has been reserved to ISAAC the Jew sitting at the right of ABOU ZEID.

As for ZEINAB, following the normal rules, she cannot squat with her guests and is therefore obliged to concentrate herself in pleasing them, bringing the large pyramids of white rice with huge piles of flat bread prepared since yesterday evening with a special smelly cow dung.

The HAG's eyes devour the basin contents :

- I'm so hungry that I could eat alone a whole hen with its bones !
- So could I, confirms a strange echo coming from the basement window.
- Who are you ? asks ABOU ZEID alarmed.
- I'm GAMAL EL DIN, the scribe, yells an enthusiastic voice.
- That's what I was afraid of, mutters sadly the HAG, understanding that the newcomer has arrived to share with them the marvellous meal with evidently less to eat for each guest.
- Greetings my friends ! shouts ABOU ZEID ordering ZEINAB to open the door.
- No ! begs the HAG. Don't be hasty ! Please don't open this door.

Everybody looks at him and he explains regretfully :

- We shall have less to eat !

- Woman, open the door ! orders very severely ABOU ZEID.

And while the HAG turns away sulkily the door opens letting in the scribe.

- You haven't yet started to eat, my friends ? he asks happily.

- Have you given my message to Mrs Sarah ? asks ISAAC.

- Yes ! replies GAMAL EL DIN. The news was spoken to her with great care.

- What do you mean, with great care ?

- GAMAL tried to choose his words in order not to disturb too much your wife, stammers ABOU ZEID embarrassed.

The scribe relates in a natural voice :

- She was expecting you. I was obliged to explain, but, don't worry, I found the words and she understood.

- In that case, says ISAAC reassured, what are we waiting to taste this melohia ?

- This man is right, states a new sinister voice coming from outside the basement window.

ALY MANSOUR yells completely panicked.

- It's the police...

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT throws his knife on the knees of ALY MANSOUR who returns

this knife immediately. Then everybody stands up except ISAAC who looks at

them dumbfounded.

ZEINAB arriving from the kitchen, shouts :

- Calm down, my friends. It is only GOMAA the sweeper.

Everybody squats down on the cushions with their legs crossed while ABOU

ZEID grumbles :

- This man is annoying us !

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT asks enthusiastically :

- Do you want me to tickle the interferer with my knife ?

- I've understood ! answers sadly GOMAA whose voice fades away.

- ZEINAB, close the window ! orders ABOU ZEID. This evening, we want no strangers to celebrate with us. We want to be between us..

- It shall be more intimate, murmurs ALY ZEIDAN.

As for the HAG, still sulky, he is heard to mutter between his closed teeth.

- By ALLAH at what time do they eat in this house ?

But ZEINAB has already filled the soup plates to the brim with melohia, with the rice and chicken swimming here and there.

Nobody speaks and each guest receives his plate in a religious silence.

Among the others, the HAG turns gratefully towards ISAAC and whispers:

- Thank you, my friends !

Then, for the next minutes, the only sounds which can be heard are the

clattering of the tongues accompanied by the noise of the lapping of the
burning soup.

Suddenly, from MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, escapes a fart which explodes in the
room

like a cannon ball.

They all look at each other....

ALY MANSOUR states humbly :

- It was I !!

ABOU ZEID stands up respectfully :

- To your health ! garbage man...

But MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, the cigarette end picker is also standing up :

- Liar... he is a dirty liar.... He is bragging. It was I...

- It is true, shouts GABER. It was CHAWKAT and the proof is that I still
smell this fart coming from CHAWKAT.

Confounded, ALY MANSOUR is obliged to keep silent whilst the cigarette end
collector sits down reassured. He yells gallantly.

- Please, consider this fart as a tribute to ZEINAB's cooking.

Everybody approves noisily.

Then ALY MANSOUR turns in a friendly way towards ABOU ZEID.

- Can I have a piece of this marvellous bread ?

- So would I like a piece of bread which I shall crumble in my melohia. It looks excellent, states the HAG.

- You are right, approves ABOU ZEID who pursues encouragingly, it was cooked all night on fresh cow shit defecated on thursday.

- This is probably the reason for its perfumed taste and its smell, whispers the HAG. In Zagazig, they use camel shit which is much drier.

Whilst ALY MANSOUR shoots a new feverish burning look at ZEINAB who blushes

again, GAMAL EL DIN asks :

- Can I have another piece of chicken ?

- Would you like a leg ?

- Not thanks, answers the scribe after watching the enormous hips of ZEINAB undulating in front of him.

- I'll be happy with the behind, suggests ALY MANSOUR in his shrill voice.

- Then I'll have the neck and the head, informs MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT with a rejoicing smile.

And while the others grope for their favourite pieces of chicken, CHAWKAT snatches with his bare hands one of the remaining hens and slices off its head with his sharpened knife.

- Well done ! admires GABER looking at ISAAC from the corner of his eyes.

ALY ZEIDAN states with subtlety :

- His mother used to call him CHAWKAT the cutthroat.

The cigarette end collector appreciates this remark with the normal modesty of a sensitive soul. So he shyly looks downwards whilst ISAAC gazes at him astonished.

Happily a noisy burp from the HAG clarifies the thoughts of each guest and the tongues unfreeze and laughs burst. ALY MANSOUR throws a bone at GABER

who receives it in the eye.

- Aie...

ABOU ZEID looks severely at ALY MANSOUR.

- Stop your childish pranks, you little rascal !

Then he turns towards ISAAC and smiles at him cordially.

- Another wing my friend ? he asks.

- No thanks, replies ISAAC. You have spoilt me tonight.

And during this time, the dripping fingers of the other guests grope in the saucepan searching for the last pieces of chicken.

The HAG is due for a severe regret when he points at a wing and asks :

- May I have this last wing ?

But ABOU ZEID answers dryly :

- No, I'm sorry, you've eaten too much !!!

And he addresses the rest of the audience :

- ZEINAB shall now sing us a song.

ALY MANSOUR yells :

- Silence everybody, the beautiful ZEINAB is about to sing.

ABOU ZEID's wife squats in a corner of the room, opens her mouth from which escapes a flood of melodious sounds which rises softly throbbing through the room with a monotonous rythm that all listen feverishly.

She sings :

- He has left me.... he has left me... he has left me.... he has left me

and all listen and a sort of hypnotic extasy gains the audience except ALY

ZEIDAN who whispers:

- This is impossible... She surely has a stomach ache.

And whilst ZEINAB continues bleating desperately : he has left me... he

has left me... he has left me... he has left me.... ABOU ZEID leans towards

ISAAC and whispers in his ear :

-The song is called "he has left me"....

CHAPTER 14

At the same moment corresponding to ZEINAB's bleating "he has left me", a horrendous scream escapes from Mrs Sarah living, in the same street, about half a mile further from ABOU ZEID's house.

- He has left me, she howls.

This coincidence between the two women may lead the reader to believe hastily in a certain affinity between the two women but such a resemblance stops with those identical words and, on one side, you can find a provoking matron with a coquettish smile adorning her toothless jaw and, on the other, a Mrs Sarah torn between anxiety and wrath.

If necessary the curious reader may peep through the key hole of Sarah's bedroom. He will discover a face dripping with tears and eyebrows quivering like comas and trembling at every sob. Then, he shall witness a complete change in Mrs Sarah's face when pain changes into wrath. This reader cannot help admiring the picture of a gracious woman as plump as ZEINAB's hens who

is struggling furiously to escape from an erotical deshabelle prepared for an ISAAC usually very interested.

Mrs Sarah does not lose time to admire her pink legs springing out from her lace nightgown... She soon emprisons them in severe and thick stockings

and slips on a dress more appropriated to her new condition of a deserted woman.

Then, she opens her window and yells with a determined voice :

- Rachel ! Rachel...

But the obstinate window of the fourth floor remains silent.

A mocking voice from the third floor asks ?

- What do you want from Rachel ?

- It's none of your business ! yells back Mrs Sarah.

- I was only trying to help ! protests the voice from the third floor.

An indignant neighbour is then heard.

- What's going on ? This chattering is preventing honest people from sleeping.

Other windows open. Somebody asks :

- But why doesn't Rachel answer ?

The first floor suggests pleasantly.

- I've an idea. Let's call Rachel together : "Rachel... Rachel...".

This time, the window of the fifth floor opens and a sleepy voice asks:

- Who is calling me ?

- It is I, answers Mrs Sarah.

- Who are you ?

- It's Mrs Sarah, cries the second floor.
- What does Mrs Sarah want at this time of the night ?
- Ask her and you'll find out, yells the first floor.
- Please, let me come up and see you. I have some news for you, shouts Mrs Sarah
- You can't come, cries Rachel. At this time of the night, Yacoub is sleeping. If you continue yelling, he shall surely wake up. So tell me quickly what you want from me.
- My news is confidential, yells Sarah. I can't tell you this news from my window.

An obliging neighbour living in the building in front of their house explains :

- She says that it's a confidential matter which cannot be related from her window.
- Then, why did she wake me up ? grumbles Rachel.
- Please tell us your confidential news, beg three curious windows.
- Wait for me, cries Rachel. I shall try not to wake Yacoub ... Slip in a dressing gown and arrive !
- You are not obliged to slip in a dressing gown, suggests pleasantly the voice from the fourth floor.

Before closing the window, Mrs Sarah perceives in the street an elderly man walking down Attarine street who has in his hand a heavy walking stick which he is twirling gaily in the air.

Mrs Sarah ignores that this man is Uncle MOHAMMED who is the principal organizer of ISAAC's murder !

CHAPTER 15

Four sinister shadows are plotting outside ABOU ZEID's house.

The four cutthroats are MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, HAG AHMED the mosque door

keeper, ALY ZEIDAN the shoe shiner and lastly, their magnanimous host, ABOU

ZEID, the Attarine bull.

A fourth shadow is stretched on the pavement next to the wall. If it were less dark, one could recognize GOMAA the sweeper in a stormy sleep still rocking with the throbbing whiffs of the melohia.

- Who will fetch the narghiles ? asks HAG AHMED.

His nerves completely shattered by the drama, ALY ZEIDAN the shoe shiner, doesn't find enough strength to answer :

ABOU ZEID shouts :

- It's up to you to fetch those narghiles. You owe me at least this compensation after the wonderful meal prepared for you.

The fifth shadow splutters :

- Your melohia was excellent but perhaps too rich....

The four men jump up anxiously with a start.

- Who's there ?

A gloomy voice stutters :

- I'm GOMAA the sweeper.

- Go and sleep further away, orders ABOU ZEID with a harsh voice.

The sweeper straightens up with difficulty, then answers with a dry mouth :

- I'm drunk, brothers ! The vapours of your melohia are clouding my mind.

ABOU ZEID turns towards CHAWKAT :

- Deal with this wretched scoundrel who has stolen the fumes of my melohia.

Of course, if you are still able to attend to such a matter after the

terrible events of this evening.

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT hoping to compensate this incident waves his knife in the

face of GOMAA and whispers ferociously :

- I shall cut you in such small pieces that your mother will only

recognize you from your usual stinking smell.

GOMAA, convinced, stands up sadly.

- Don't be angry, my brother ! I was only speaking that way because the

perfume of your melohia has created a turmoil in my stomach. On your

mother's life, ask ZEINAB to prepare it with less spice next time.

ABOU ZEID calms down and cries :

- I forgive you, oh GOMAA, and in order to help us go and fetch four

narghiles from the coffee place "Abdallah". Against this, I shall let you

smell tomorrow ZEINAB's cooking.

- And do you plan to prepare a new dish of melohia ?

- Yes !

- And it shall be less spicy ?

ABOU ZEID promises with his hand over the heart.

- It shall be as light as the urine of a new born baby.

- It's therefore a promise, oh ABOU ZEID ! I trust you, continues the sweeper with dignity and I shall go immediately to "Abdallah" and bring back the four narghiles.

- I shall accompany you, suggests CHAWKAT eargerly.

- You... don't move, orders coldly ABOU ZEID.

And whilst GOMAA rushes away, the four sinister shadows are left alone.

- Thief, mutters ABOU ZEID to MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

- Coward... liar.... braggart.... parasite, whispers with indignation the HAG AHMED.

- I shall crush his head, menaces ABOU ZEID clenching his fists.

CHAWKAT staggers with shame :

- His mother used to call him CHAWKAT the cutthroat, sneers ZEIDAN.

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT stammers at last :

- No, it's not true, my brothers... my mother never called me CHAWKAT the

cutthroat !

- Then, what did she call you ? asks sarcastically ALY ZEIDAN Shaky

CHAWKAT ?

- Grief stricken, confesses CHAWKAT.

- It was not my fault, brothers. I tried... I tried very hard but I

could'nt prevent my hand from shaking at the last moment. Please, forgive me.

The HAG suggests :

- Please, ABOU ZEID, let me talk to CHAWKAT.

- Let the HAG speak !

After a few moments silence, the holy man questions in a soft voice :

- Why do you refuse to kill ISAAC my brother ?

- I can't ! stammers CHAWKAT. It's impossible...

- You are not reasonable, continues the HAG very gently.

- I know, answers CHAWKAT more and more afflicted.

- You know also that you have abused of ABOU ZEID's hospitality ? profers

the HAG with a stronger and more severe voice.

- Don't trouble me more, begs the ex-cutthroat.

But the HAG continues cruelly :

- ABOU ZEID is your friend. Isn't he ?

- He is my best friend, whispers the cigarette end collector.

- And this friend has offered you marvellous food this evening...
- Yes, the best food I ever tasted in my whole life.
- And tonight you have laughed... you have danced... sung and had fun.
- Yes ! admits a pitiful voice.
- Under such conditions, continues the HAG severely, I cannot understand for which reason you are refusing to render such a small service to our friend ABOU ZEID.
- Ask me what you want, wails CHAWKAT, but not this. Don't insist... it's useless. I refuse to kill ISAAC the Jew... and my answer is definite.
- Why ?

The false cutthroat ponders for a few moments, then explains in a low voice :

- Because I love him....

To this statement, the three shadows reply indignantly together.

- But we all love him as much as you do !
- And you want to kill him ?

ALY ZEDAN remarks :

- Our ex-cutthroat is completely stupid.

ABOU ZEID tries to explain :

- We have no possibility to act otherwise.
- Then, why not kill him together ?

The three men protest.

- It would be too cruel, points out The HAG..

And ABOU ZEID concludes with his usual common sense with a final tone which cannot be discussed.

- We can't kill him all together. In my house, a friend like ISAAC can only die without noticing what 's happening.

And ABOU ZEID pursues :

- We had asked you to proceed gently and at the last moment, you have let us down. By the way, we were lucky that ISAAC did not understand what was going on.

- Under such conditions, suggests CHAWKAT, let's forget our plan to murder ISAAC theJew !

- On the life of ALLAH , he is insane !!!!

- If we follow his mad idea, where shall we find the 100 pounds for the Attarine mosque ? whispers the HAG.

- And SOHAD's dowry ? wails ABOU ZEID desperately. What can we do ?

And while the four men reflect on this difficult problem, they are interrupted by a shadow tottering under the weight of four fair-sized narghiles.

- Here you are, my brothers ! yells the obliging GOMAA.

- Thanks sweeper.

And while GOMAA disappears, the HAG exclaims suddenly.

- Kneel and pray, my brothers. I have an idea.

- What's your idea, HAG ?

- To pray and beg ALLAH to call ISAAC at his side this evening.

- You are insane, man. What are you saying ? ALLAH should kill ISAAC ?

The holy man insists firmly :

- I'm not insane. We must believe in ALLAH and in the Prophet and if we believe in them and pray strongly enough, ALLAH will fulfil our wish... And he starts praying.

- ALLAH ! you are the greatest and MOHAMMED is your Prophet.... Please listen to our prayer and if it is fulfilled you shall receive through the Attarine mosque a wonderful gift.

The three men crouch on the pavement with their heads touching the ground.

The HAG towers above them. His voice is sweet and convincing.

- Oh ALLAH ... Oh MOHAMMED.... we are your faithful servants and in your infinite wisdom, we ask you to call at your side our friend ISAAC who has lived long enough and who will be happy to stay with you.

- Do you think that it's going to work ? whispers MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.

- You blaspheming infidel ! ALLAH always listens to religious people like me. He knows that I have often accomplished pilgrimages to Mecca... but let me continue my prayer, oh brothers....

After a few moments silence, the fervent voice rises again.

- Oh ALLAH, I beg you to fulfil our wish. We are but humble sinners who love you and your reward shall be the marriage of your children ABDEL HAMID

and SOHAD abd a donation of 100 pounds for the Attarine mosque.

It seems that this insistence and more especially the fine reward promised brings some fruit. Because at the same instant, ZEINAB opens the door and alarmed, shouts :

- ISAAC is not feeling very well !

Then she closes the door whilst the four grateful shadows cry joyously :

- A miracle.... a miracle !

But a new shadow interrupts them :

- What are you doing outside so late ?

- Uncle MOHAMMED ... they exclaim together. So you haven't left for Mecca ?

And while the four men surround him, the voice of ZEINAB throws cruelly at them the last news :

- ISAAC wants to return to his house. I believe that he is already feeling

better.

- I can see that your business is not working very well, sneers Uncle

MOHAMMED and he adds :

- Unfortunately, I don't believe that I can help you.

- Please, join us, begs ABOU ZEID. ZEINAB shall prepare for you a nice cup of coffee... We need your advice. Perhaps you may invent something to help us...

Otherwise, I shall end this business one way or another.

- I accept, states Uncle MOHAMMED

And while he follows them into the apartment, ABOU ZEID keeps his eyes fixed on the heavy walking stick in the hands of his uncle.

CHAPTER 16

Rachel proves that she is indeed Mrs Sarah's closest friend when she tears down the stairs hardly taking time to withdraw her curlers and even forgetting to apply on her cheeks a light make up generally required because of the permanent presence in the staircase of the gallant fourth floor neighbour.

She throws herself heavily on the sofa which whines back a pitiful protest.

- So, tell me. Tell me everything.

- This monster has left me, weeps Mrs Sarah desperately.

Astonished, Rachel asks :

- Who is this monster, dearest ?

Mrs Sarah stands up irritated and shouts :

- Don't be stupid.... You know very well that I have only one man in my life and that man is...

- ISAAC ! completes Rachel soothingly. And he has just left you ! Tell me the whole story and she wedges herself comfortably between two cushions to be in good shape whilst listening to such an exciting story.

- Read this letter, pleads Mrs Sarah, giving her with a trembling hand the note brought by GAMAL EL DIN.

And the letter is read over and over again by Rachel and tears flow down

the cheeks of Mrs Sarah, choking with sobs which cannot be stopped.

- Calm down, Sarah, my little dove.

Mrs Sarah suddenly glares at her with eyes which are now perfectly dry and yells angrily.

- Stop calling me my little dove. I'm not your little dove. Don't you realize that my ISAAC has left me after 30 years marriage ?

Rachel takes out a handkerchief from her pocket and suggests affectionately :

- Here you are ! Start by wiping your tears. Then blow your nose... as hard as you can. That's it... You now feel better, don't you ? At present, we must prepare together a plan.

Mrs Sarah's mind is in a turmoil, reflecting furiously.

- I have an idea, cries Rachel.

- What idea ?

Rachel suggests brightly :

- You should immediately go to the police station with your letter and drop a complaint against ISAAC for desertion of your matrimonial home. You remember dear Sarah that I have a cousin who was in your case who lodged a similar complaint against her husband....

But Mrs Sarah stops her immediately :

- Your cousin is not in my case. She escaped with her gymnastic teacher

and her desperate husband was obliged to leave their matrimonial home.
This

is not my case. You should also realize that ISAAC has left for Israël. If

I show this letter to the police, a complaint will follow against me and I

shall risk life imprisonment because, as you know, Israël doesn't exist and

this is repeated to us all the time...

- You are right, admits Rachel intelligently. You cannot mix the police
with your family problem.

Rachel hesitates for a moment, then obligingly continues :

- Then, why don't we ask a good friend for an advice on this delicate
matter ?

- You suggest that I ask YACOUB, your husband ? This is indeed a good idea.

- No... not YACOUB, answers Rachel hastily. I was thinking of somebody
else. Somebody very intelligent..., understanding..., who could give you a
piece of good advice.

- Who are you thinking of ?

- I don't know, answers Rachel very embarrassed... I was thinking of a man
who could solve your problem. Such a man must exist...

- But where can I find this man ? moans Mrs Sarah.

- Perhaps... in our building, replies vaguely Rachel. In fact... why not

call our neighbour of the fourth floor ? He is always very helpful,
ANJOUeeable, resourceful. Only yesterday, he was telling me...

- No, replies Mrs Sarah firmly.

- Why do you refuse to question our neighbour ?

- No, insists Mrs Sarah peremptorily. If you don't have any other idea,

you may return to your apartment where the loveable clinging arms of
YACOUB

are waiting for you passionately.

Rachel offended, stands up. Mrs Sarah starts sobbing again.

- No ! no ! don't go please. Stay with me. My nerves are completely

shattered. Rachel lets herself fall once more on the sofa which whines once
more in protest.

Mrs Sarah pursues :

- Please, tell me what you would do in my place if very suddenly YACOUB
left you?

Rachel helpfully, answers :

- I would first ask the advice of my neighbour of the fourth floor...

These words provoke a new flood of tears.

- Please, don't mention your neighbour of the fourth floor who always
tries to kiss me when he finds me alone in the staircase...

Rachel needs a few seconds to recover from this news, broken to her

without any preparation. Then she gasps :

- What shall we do ?

- Let's first read once more this note, suggests Mrs Sarah.

She snatches the paper and the blurred letters dance once more before her eyes.

She stammers :

- This letter is indeed from my husband. I recognize his handwriting.

- So do I, confirms sadly Rachel.

At the same moment, Mrs Sarah hesitates :

- There's a detail which I don't understand. Look at the envelope.

- It's also written by ISAAC, isn't it ? asks Rachel.

- Yes !

- Then, what's wrong with this envelope ?

- I seem to notice a mistake in the spelling of our name where COEN is written with an "H" and our name is spelt normally without an "H".

- Is that important ?

- No, answers Mrs Sarah discouraged. ISACC sometimes writes his name with an "H", he thinks that an "H" is much more elegant.

- In that case....

- Alas, sighs Mrs Sarah, this letter is undoubtedly from ISAAC. This

conclusion proves definitely that ISAAC has left me...

Rachel approves sadly.

- Yes, my dear. ISAAC has left you. I don't see what you can do about it ?

Mrs Sarah looks thoughtfully at her friend.

- Let's suppose that YACOUB leaves you and escapes to Israël.

Rachel shudders and answers in a thin voice.

- This is impossible....

- I know that this is impossible ! confirms Mrs Sarah. But just let's

imagine that YACOUB leaves you under similar circumstances, what would you

do ?

Rachel confesses :

- I would rush to the fourth floor and discuss the matter with my neighbour.

Sarah replies impatiently :

- But after, what would you do ?

Rachel scratches her head.

- After ? I don't know. I suppose that I would check our bank accounts and also find out if some money is owed to us....

Mrs Sarah yells triumphantly.

- Well, that is the problem. Yesterday I went to our bank and our account

is untouched. Today is Friday and the banks are closed. ISAAC could not withdraw any money from our account. On the other hand, tomorrow is the first of the month and we have large sums which are to be refunded to us...

- What's your conclusion ? asks Rachel.

- My conclusion is that ISAAC has not left for Israël.

- And what about the letter brought by GAMAL EL DIN the scribe ? questions Rachel.

- GAMAL EL DIN is known as a very famous forger and he has probably imitated the handwriting of ISAAC on this note.

- In that case, what shall you do ? asks Rachel visibly impressed by Mrs Sarah's brilliant conclusions who continues :

- First, I must find GAMAL EL DIN the scribe, suggests Mrs Sarah.

After a few moments silence, Rachel puzzled asks :

- But why should you search for GAMAL EL DIN ?

- Because he gave me the letter, answers Mrs Sarah impatiently.

And she pursues :

- I must question him and also frighten him. He is probably the last man to have seen ISAAC. I know where I can find him. He lives a few blocks away down Attarine street.

- And if he isn't home ?

- Then, I shall search for him elsewhere... perhaps at the Abdallah coffee place or at ABOU ZEID's flat. Believe me, I shall find him !

- You are right, my dear. If the same drama happened to me, I would have acted the same way.

Mrs Sarah, greatly moved, looks at her friend.

- You are indeed a good neighbour. Without your help and brilliant advice, I don't know what I would have done !

Rachel blushes with modesty, happy to have helped her friend. The two women rise from the sofa and Rachel returns to her warm matrimonial bed where YACOUB, very much in love, is waiting impatiently for her return.

Mrs Sarah starts the research of GAMAL EL DIN which shall take her from the scribe's house to the Abdallah coffee place and lastly to ABOU ZEID's flat.

On her way, she crosses the street in front of a young couple quarrelling and gesticulating noisily. The girl has oily hair falling in small curls on a couple of bulging eyes as for the young man, he wears proudly a very elegant stripped red pyjama cut following the latest fashion and designed by Elegantia, the smartest shop in Attarine street.

Mrs Sarah is unaware of course that these two young people are SOHAD and ABDEL HAMID the hairdresser and that they are the direct reason of ISAAC's

disappearance.

The young couple is heading also for ABOU ZEID's flat.

CHAPTER 17

Since five o'clock in the afternoon, the two young lovers are wandering in the streets of Alexandria. ABDEL HAMID is strolling in front and SOHAD two steps behind very respectfully. But after over four hours of this very formal pursuit, the lovers have decided to sit down on a bench in the public park facing Attarine street.

On the metallic wire linking the telegraph poles, groups of birds are perched similar to musical notes chirping gaily whilst the two romantical lovers dream together of future happiness in each other's arms.

As a matter of fact, the two lovers have surely lost their mind to act so shockingly in a public garden.

- Do you smell this wonderful perfumed breeze ? whispers SOHAD.

- There is no wonderful breeze, answers ABDEL HAMID. You are smelling my armpits.

However, the magic of love renders useless this material clarification.

- Oh my insane lover ! bleats SOHAD.

And the voice of ABDEL HAMID burning with passion rises :

- By ALLAH ... by the Prophet MOHAMMED... you are my wonderful water melon

with your head like rainy clouds.

The image describes by the hairdresser is so beautiful that a proud sigh escapes from him. SOHAD for her part, tries to find a convenient answer and finally after several attempts, articulates :

- You are the divine hairdresser of my hair described as rainy clouds.

The two lovers have now an equal score. But ABDEL HAMID in a last serious effort manages to win the contest confirming that the full moon is mentioned because SOHAD's beautiful belly now contains the initial grain of their baby.

- Our child, whispers SOHAD enraptured.

- Our boy ! rectifies ABDEL HAMID firmly.

The "imminent-engaged" couple gaze at each other. SOHAD suggests :

- Our little ABOU ZEID...

but the hairdresser answers immediately :

- If this boy shall have the charm and intelligence of his father coupled with the muscles of his grand father, we shall call him Nasser... our baby Nasser.

- And if the baby were a girl ? asks SOHAD boldly.

- This is impossible ! cries the hairdresser. You cannot do that to me...

The baby shall be a fat boy and everybody shall see him sucking your breast in the street. People will say : this baby is Nasser, the son of ABDEL

HAMID the hairdresser.

SOHAD bursts out laughing like a bag of peanuts. Then suddenly her laugh freezes and she suggests practically :

- All this is for later on. Tonight you must take me to see a picture. At the Concordia, they are playing a wonderful love picture.

But ABDEL HAMID does not seem to appreciate this suggestion with the expected enthusiasm. It is also to be noted that since a few minutes the musical notes of the telegraph wires have flown away. It even seems that the evening breeze has become less impish.

The hairdresser growls :

- Another film of love ? You want to look at men ?

SOHAD cries out frightened.

- Who wants to look at men ? she asks.

- You do... replies quietly ABDEL HAMID.

Facing innocently this terrible suspicion, SOHAD squints candidly and declares :

- You know very well that I am only interested by you, my love !

- In that case, replies the hairdresser logically, why do you want to go to the cinema ? You can watch me from this bench for the next couple of hours and towards 10 o'clock, we shall go together to your father's flat

and perhaps we shall then both be tempted by their melohia.

- Please... cries out SOHAD. Take me to the Concordia. You can't refuse the prayer of a pregnant woman.

- I give up ! states generously ABDEL HAMID.

- Oh darling, I'm so happy. Thank you... thank you...

- Before you thank me, remember that you are not to look at any other men.

So you will turn back to the screen and enjoy the voices of the actors.

Unfortunately SOHAD does not seem to appreciate such a decision. It is to be noted that often between couples, some misunderstanding can occur with dramatical consequences.

So, forgetting the efforts of her lover, SOHAD starts being sulky and the two romantical lovers are no more in the arms of one another. Happily, this quarrel comes at the right moment as a policeman is lurking not too far.

- I shall go to the pictures alone, states SOHAD.

And ABDEL HAMID barks harshly :

- And if you go alone, I shall never see you again.

The defeated girl hiccups tragically.

- Then, take me back to my mother !

A huge flood of tears drowns her face.

ABDEL HAMID confused, is obliged to look away.

He thinks : "ALLAH is merciful as at this late hour the public garden is practically empty".

- Stop crying, yells the hairdresser.

But the young girl hiccups still more strongly and between two sobs she cries out:

- You don't love me anymore !

- "What bad luck" thinks ABDEL HAMID. I wish I could leave her calm down alone. But she is capable of going to that cinema or worse she may return to her flat against ABOU ZEID's order to return home after 10 o'clock.

SOHAD's despair has attracted the attention of four or five passers by who have stopped in front of the bench.

The first man asks curiously :

- Why are you crying ?

The second man informs indignantly the third.

- This man has beaten the poor girl.

The fourth passer by very moved sheds himself a tear which slips down his beard.

A tall bean pole shakes off the growing crowd vomited by the nearby streets and remarks accusingly :

- Learn, oh man, that one must never beat a woman in the street.

Everybody rattles after him :

- He is right. Never beat a woman in the street..

Seizing the arm of SOHAD, ABDEL HAMID is obliged to flee as quickly as possible followed by the jeers of the crowd surrounding him.

CHAPTER 18

When ABOU ZEID returns to his flat followed by his friends, he finds

ISAAC waiting for him near the door.

- Thanks indeed for a marvellous evening, stutters ISAAC still disturbed

by the rich food. Then, seeing Uncle MOHAMMED entering behind ABOU ZEID, he

exclaims :

- Oh MOHAMMED.... what a nice surprise ! I thought that you had left for Mecca. As you are here now with us, I shall stay for another few minutes.

- Alas, I'm no more leaving for my pilgrimage, states sheepishly Uncle

MOHAMMED. Then he adds :

- I've been swindled.

A chorus of astonished yells greet these words.

Uncle MOHAMMED confirms sadly :

- Unfortunately it's true. I shall now relate to you the whole story.

ABOU ZEID interrupts him :

- You have a marvellous walking stick, Uncle ! A true weapon...

- No, just a simple walking stick bought yesterday for my pilgrimage to

Mecca, states modestly Uncle MOHAMMED who adds :

- So, I was telling you that I have been swindled by an horrible scoundrel...

- But your walking stick ? exclaims ABOU ZEID looking at ISAAC. It seems heavy enough to kill a man...

- That's perfectly true ! But let me proceed with my story. So I was telling you that this horrible scoundrel taking advantage of my kindness...

ABOU ZEID interrupts him once more.

- Please Uncle, give me first your walking stick.

- Here you are... So you all know the story of my sale of the tramway.

- We know your story !

- But you don't know that my customer was unfortunately an horrible scoundrel and even more... a thief ready to take advantage of my innocence.

ISAAC closes his eyes. He really doesn't feel very well. The melohia...

the lack of air... He leans for a moment against GABER's shoulder. Uncle

MOHAMMED pursues his story :

- Just imagine that the tramway had been paid to me with false bank notes !

- This is impossible, cries GAMAL EL DIN revolted.

- Honesty doesn't exist anymore, exclaims ALY ZEIDAN spitting generously on the floor.

- Your client has surprised your good faith..

- It's really a shame !

ISAAC has now completely collapsed against GABER. He opens a sniveling eye :

- My poor friend. You shall be obliged to work in order to pay for your pilgrimage.
- Never... howls Uncle MOHAMMED.
- It would be really disgusting to oblige him to work.
- I haven't worked since 1929 ! cries Uncle MOHAMMED. At that time, my employer was a rich and fat oil merchant who employed me to empty his barrels of oil into bottles.
- This was indeed very hard work.
- So, one day... pursues Uncle MOHAMMED.

At the same moment, ABOU ZEID unseen by the others moves behind the sofa

with the stick which he rises slowly. With only one blow, he shall break ISAAC's head like a ripe melon. Even if ISAAC's brains shall be scattered all over the sofa, he will not find time to feel the blow. He shall die without suffering among his friends as planned.

Unaware of ABOU ZEID's plan, Uncle MOHAMMED pursues his story :

- So one day, this rich and fat oil merchant tells me : "Oh MOHAMMED, I'm leaving you alone this afternoon to visit my cousin ZOBEDA...",

And this is the moment chosen by ABOU ZEID to bring down his stick on ISAAC's head. Unfortunately, when the bludgeon falls, GABER annoyed by the

vicinity of ISAAC, pushes him aside and it is GABER who receives the terrible blow on his shoulder.

- Aïe, yells GABER. I am dead....

His cry of pain hardly covers the joyful exclamations of the others.

- Well aimed !

- What a splendid double blow...

ALY ZEIDAN pushes away disgustedly ISAAC's body.

- A dead body always impresses me.

Very practical, the HAG cries :

- Get hold of his wallet.

Bewildered ABOU ZEID drops the walking stick while the moaning of GABER starts again :

- Murderer... You have killed me !

But nobody listens. ABOU ZEID is trembling visibly. HAG AHMED reassures him.

- Don't worry my son. You are only the hand of ALLAH.

- You have killed me, repeats GABER.

- This double blow was written in ALLAH's book, says piously HAG AHMED.

However at the same moment a knocking at the door of the flat is heard.

- Who can visit us at such an hour ?

ZEINAB looks through the basement window.

- It's only SOHAD and ABDEL HAMID.

- Don't let them enter this apartment, begs ABOU ZEID.

But the "imminent-engaged-couple" is already in the flat.

- Father... father... I refuse to marry ABDEL HAMID, cries out SOHAD.

- It's too late, mumbles the hairdresser pointing at ISAAC's body. Your father has already prepared the dowry.

GAMAL EL DIN leaning over ISAAC, declares :

- This man is not dead. He has only fainted.

- I was the only one to receive the blow, moans GABER.

This remark brings a general sigh of relief from everybody.

Uncle MOHAMMED, the usual spokesman of this assembly, cries out impatiently:

- What are you waiting for to reanimate him ? ZEINAB, bring some vinegar.

GABER, if you are capable to move, bring us a towel. As for you all try and sit him more comfortably.

Everybody hastens around ISAAC. ABOU ZEID takes hold of his hand. ALY

ZEIDAN places wet compressed on his forehead. SOHAD brings him a glass of fresh water. ABDEL HAMID pats his cheeks while CHAWKAT, GAMAL EL DIN and

ALY MANSOUR rearrange the cushions behind him. As for GABER, still in a bad

condition, the best he can do is to blow in ISAAC's face a corrupt breath.

In a corner of the room, HAG AHMED is crouching on the floor praying with all his might for a prompt recovery of ISAAC the jew.

This way, ISAAC surrounded by the watchfull love of his friends, rests peacefully.

When at last he opens his eyes, he is moved by all these friendship testimonies :

- You are spoiling me indeed, he mutters. It was only a spell of dizziness and I have now completely recovered.

While ISAAC settles back confortably on the cushions, he cannot imagine that at the same moment the genius mind of Uncle MOHAMMED has already prepared a new plan to send definitely ISAAC to a better world.

CHAPTER 19

Four sinister shadows are plotting outside ABOU ZEID's house.

- Thief ! mutters ABOU ZEID.

- Coward... liar... braggart... parasite... whispers HAG AHMED.

Don't be mistaken. You are now reading chapter XIX and this time, the four cutthroats are ABOU ZEID, HAG AHMED, Uncle MOHAMMED and GABER.

- You are a criminal, adds Uncle MOHAMMED.

- Without any consciousness, completes the HAG.

GABER receives these remarks heroically with his hand caressing softly his bruised shoulder.

ABOU ZEID disenchanted sighs :

- All this is becoming monotonous.

- Please explain man, why did you push away ISAAC at such a critical moment ?

Didn't you realize that the walking stick was about to blow his head into pieces ?

- I didn't know

- Is that an excuse, you idiot?

- Let me speak to him, suggests the HAG

Then addressing GABER, he asks in a sugary voice :

- My son, you know our love for you !
 - I know, replies the cart hauler moved by these words.
 - And to call you coward, thief, liar, braggart, we must have a good reason.
 - If I understand correctly, replies GABER, you are angry because I received the blow instead of ISAAC.
 - That's the general idea, answers kindly the HAG.
 - I'm sorry ! points out GABER remorsefully, the main reason is that I am clumsy but I promise you solemnly that this shall not happen again. And GABER raises his right arm and spits over his shoulder.
 - I swear on my father's life.
 - You father is dead since the last ten years, notices the HAG. So, please don't mix you father in this business.
 - What about my mother, then ? suggests GABER tentatively.
- But this offer is duly rejected by the three plotters. Then GABER asks :
- What I don't understand is the reason why you have not taken advantage of the fact that ISAAC fainted to kill him at that moment... but a torrent of insults follows :
 - Man... you should be ashamed to speak this way....
 - Such an idea is ignominious.
 - You are a man without integrity.

- You have no manners.
- Kill a man while he is unconscious ...

Overwhelmed with remorse, GABER presents once more his excuses :

- Now that ISAAC has recovered, do you have an other idea, ya HAG ?
- Alas, I have no idea to offer !

Then Uncle MOHAMMED suggests :

- I have an idea.
- Speak up man.
- Above the front door of your flat, you have an old chimney weighing about 495 okes. My plan is simple. This chimney is not fixed and can be moved easily if somebody pushes it when your front door opens. In consequence, the first guest leaving you flat shall receive the 495 okes of this chimney on his head. This first guest shall be of course ISAAC and GABER will be the man to push the chimney on ISAAC as soon as your front door opens.
- Very ingenious, cry the three men.
- But the problem shall be to aim correctly.
- No problem to aim. This chimney is exactly above your front door.
- If we fail this time, declares the HAG solemnly, three failures will mean that ALLAH is against ISAAC's murder.

- You shall succeed, cries ABOU ZEID enthusiastically. Then turning to

GABER, he adds :

- You have five minutes to prepare this chimney.

Lastly he looks at his uncle with admiration.

- You are truly a genius, Uncle MOHAMMED !

- This is nothing at all for me. If I were in my usual cracking form, I would have found a way for your whole house to collapse on ISAAC.

- I prefer your idea of the chimney, concludes hastily ABOU ZEID.

And while the three men return to the flat to join ISAAC for the last time, GABER, still troubled by his aching shoulder, climbs laboriously towards the chimney.

CHAPTER 20

The instant of truth has arrived...

You have strolled with me along Attarine street stopping for a few moments to enjoy ABOU ZEID's company. Then you have paid a visit to ALY MANSOUR's exciting wife and become later an important witness to two meetings in Abdallah Coffee place. Lastly, you have studied very carefully the problem of ISAAC's murder coupled with the very delicate question of the evaluation of the price of the hairdresser's honour.

Page by page, our sinister heroes have built patiently the plan to murder ISAAC. Two plots had been prepared. Unfortunately, both failed.

For a certain time, you have believed in MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT, but the apprentice cutthroat failed to enter as expected in the heart of the problem. As for ABOU ZEID, another authentic cutthroat, success did not reward his conscientious efforts.

Let's not forget the pious prayers of the HAG which also did not change the situation although a very strong appeal for help was submitted to ALLAH and to the Prophet.

All this is tragic indeed, as the murder of ISAAC remains necessary !

But which way ?

After two successive failures followed by the hearty pious prayer from the

HAG, it seems that a single sip of a poisoned mint tea would prove sufficient to solve the problem. But everybody discouraged me insisting that such a method of murder was too common because used too often in books

and cinema. Somebody adds :

"this poisoned mint tea is a flat idea and by using it, you would be like a man without trousers".

Kindly note that I am quite willing to stroll down Attarine with the rest of the gang without my trousers if the poisoned mint tea could immediately solve my problem.

Hag AHMED warned me before I started to relate this story :

- The real difficulty is that the murder, even of a jew, should never take place on a friday.

- I cannot really believe the HAG as, after a solid promise of a donation to the Attarine mosque, it would seem incredible that ALLAH would then forbid a murder committed on a friday.

For the moment, let's thank the Prophet for Uncle MOHAMMED's last idea of the chimney falling suddenly on ISAAC and believing in this fantastic idea, I'm ready to take any bets on the success of this plan.

And when ISAAC shall finally be killed by the fall of this chimney, my

story will end like an authentic fairy tale where our heroes will marry and live happily ever after with the birth of successive numerous children during the years to come, all boys and all named NASSER as our glorious Rais.

CHAPTER 21

Whilst ZEINAB blushes under the compliments of ISAAC coupled with the burning glances from the garbage collector, ABOU ZEID always very affectionate, surrounds ISAAC with various proofs of his friendship. As for Hag AHMED, the holy man reassured lifts a pious eye towards the ceiling muttering at the same time in his beard a prayer in favour of ISAAC's future soul.

As for the marriage broker, turning his head away, he manages to escape ABOU ZEID's pathetic wet kiss.

- Good bye, my friends. We shall soon meet in presence of ALLAH.

ABOU ZEID looks more moved than he should and he cannot refrain from caressing ISAAC's hand.

Behind him, Uncle MOHAMMED is smiling good naturedly. As for the others, they are more boisterous than ever.

- Truly, oh ABOU ZEID, this is indeed a wonderful evening.

- Where is GABER ? asks ISAAC.

- He's gone to Abdallah to return the narguiles.

After the usual bowing, they direct their steps towards the entrance of ABOU ZEID's flat.

A cry from ZEINAB stops them.

- Soot is falling from the chimney into the melohia !

Uncle MOHAMMED winks at ABOU ZEID.

- We shall send for the chimney sweeper.

The guests are now near the front door. Uncle MOHAMMED holds ISAAC by the

shoulders. He opens the door, takes a step backwards and says politely :

- After you my friend.

But ISAAC who is good mannered, also protests strongly.

- After you MOHAMMED, you are the eldest !

- It's true, states MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT gaily. Uncle MOHAMMED is the eldest

of us all and by far..

And he starts laughing. But his laughs freezes under the menacing glare of ABOU ZEID. The HAG declares nobly :

- ISAAC is our guest. For this reason, oh ABOU ZEID, he shall be the first to leave this flat...

- I'm sorry, I shall not leave this apartment before you, answers pleasantly the marriage broker.

- What an endless discussion, protests CHAWKAT laughing once more. I believe that you are all being too polite and I also believe that the first to leave this flat should be... Uncle MOHAMMED !

And before anybody can stop him, he pushes abruptly the Uncle out of the apartment. MOHAMMED launched outside disappears and ABOU ZEID mentally

collapsing, closes the door whilst a deafening noise is heard.. the shattering smash of the chimney.

Everybody jumps up startled.

- What's that ?

- Probably a bomb dropped by the Zionists, cries ABOU ZEID. But his heart is beating very strongly. He looks sadly at ISAAC whilst the HAG approaches him and pats his back.

- My condolences, he whispers. ALLAH has called your uncle who is now sitting at his side with the prophet MOHAMMED. A great loss indeed for us all.

ABOU ZEID overcome with sadness, sighs...

At the same moment, a strong knock is heard on the front door.

- It's the chimney sweeper, reports ZEINAB looking through the basement window. He has already arrived to repair our chimney.

- I'm not the chimney sweeper, replies firmly the unrecognisable horrible scarecrow blackened with soot mixed with white plaster.

- Then, who are you ?

A terribly discouraging voice announces :

- I'm Uncle MOHAMMED !

This news brings a shriek of joy from everybody. HAG AHMED and ABOU ZEID plunge towards him and hug him in their arms.

- We thought that you were...

But they stop in time.

- What happened ? asks ISAAC.

- It was the chimney, explains briefly Uncle MOHAMMED.

And he adds restraining himself :

- My only question is who is the son of a bitch who pushed me outside ?

- It was I, confessed MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT in a thin voice.

Uncle MOHAMMED, who finds himself with his walking stick in his hands, brandishes the heavy bludgeon and brings it down in one single blow on the head of the cigarette end collector. But, unfortunately, the walking stick breaks whilst MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT does not seem particularly affected by this blow.

CHAWKAT, smiling, takes a first step towards Uncle MOHAMMED followed by a second step, then suddenly senseless, he slips gracefully down on the floor. Uncle MOHAMMED moans :

- Man without faith... you have broken my brand new walking stick !

But for the moment, CHAWKAT does not seem capable to beg forgiveness for such a crime. The smile printed on his face and his closed eyes are those of a man asleep enjoying some happy dream.

Two or three laughs erupt from the others.

But GAMAL EL DIN with a sense of solidarity, growls :

- I challenge those who are making fun of a man who has received such a blow !

Such a daring statement is also very reckless as one cannot tickle the respectability of men who have lived such strenuous moments.

ABOU ZEID asks :

- To whom are you speaking, man ?

ALY MANSOUR hidden behind ZEINAB answers for all.

- We are not afraid of you, effeminate terror !

A horrifying sound escapes from ABOU ZEID who staggers through the room astounded.

- You are calling me effeminate ? You have forgotten that I'm the bull of Attarine street. Unbelievers... men without religion...

- Whom are you addressing ? asks the HAG AHMED

- I'm speaking to you all, infidels...

This last insult is very serious and cannot be accepted by such an

honourable assembly. A terrible brawl is brewing.

ISAAC rushes right and left.

- My good friends. I beg you to calm down...such a lovely evening... We all love each other...

But his pleas are unheard. The insults hurled at each other are too important and deserve revenge.

HAG AHMED starts the battle by tearing away a heavy piece of piping from the wall which he brandishes around his head. Pawing impatiently the floor, he howls. In a savage stampede, he then reaches ALY MANSOUR and ALY ZEIDAN

which he fells down together.

- This blow is for ALLAH, he neighs mowing down ZEINAB also inadvertently.

- This is for the Prophet, yells back ABOU ZEID, twirling the body of

MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT around his head and bringing it down on HAG AHMED with a

terrifying cracking of bones doubled by the shrieks of pain from CHAWKAT.

And everybody is now engaged in a total relentless, cruel, war where no truce can be negotiated.

ISAAC cries frantically :

- My friends... please... stop....

ABDEL HAMID seizing ALY ZEIDAN tries to repeat the action of his ex father

in law but is less successful. He only manages to waltz without much conviction around the room until a drum sent by a skillful hand stops definitely the waltz of the couple dancing in each other's arms.

GAMAL EL DIN creates a certain diversion when he empties the basin of melohia on the head of Uncle MOHAMMED where soot and plaster mix together

with the smelly and sticky green streaks.

During this time, the tearing away of the tube by HAG AHMED causes the sudden downpour of icy water on defenders and attackers.

The brawl reaches its peak when GABER innocently enters the room watching the battle with astonishment until his head stops the flight of a heavy stool.

ISAAC who is now in the kitchen lends a helpful hand to the sweet Sohad who has organized a branch of the red crescent to help the wounded. A

bandage here and there after which the heroic pugnacious soldiers do not

hesitate to throw themselves once more in the battle with new eagerness and

courage.

The uproar is at its maximum but the victory is still doubtful when

through the front door left open by GABER , appears suddenly... Mrs Sarah.

The silence is restored immediately.

HAG AHMED pretends to scratch his back with the piping. MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT

who seems to have recovered, uses the point of his knife to cure his ears.

The others smile sheepishly while ABOU ZEID straightens up smoothing his dirty bloodstained gallabeya.

Then, more magnificent than ever, the bull of Attarine street bows gallantly before Mrs Sarah and exclaims :

- Welcome, oh beloved wife of our friend ISAAC. This house is yours.

CHAPTER 22

Mrs Sarah doesn't lose much time in admiring the wounded hero.

Her first problem is to clear as soon as possible the circumstances of the disappearance of her husband. Consequently, she asks anxiously :

- Is GAMAL EL DIN here ?

- The letter. She has come for the letter, whispers the scribe with his nerves completely shattered. Mrs Sarah at last catches sight of him.

- The letter ? You are sure this letter was remitted to you by ISAAC ?

When ? At what time ? Where is ISAAC now ?

- Penguin, calls affectionately ISAAC coming from the kitchen. I'm here...

- You are here ? howls Mrs Sarah. Are you sure that you are here ? What have they done to you ?

For a moment, ISAAC's look wanders thoughtfully from ABOU ZEID to MOHAMMED

without forgetting the HAG AHMED, GABER, MANSOUR and ZEIDAN.

Then satisfied he answers :

- To me ? They haven't done anything.

ABOU ZEID wipes the flow of blood streaming from his eyebrows.

- We were having a friendly discussion, he states.

The others yell :

- We were having fun.

Uncle MOHAMMED grasps a corner of the HAG's gallabeya with which he tries

to stop the flood of blood running from his eyebrows to his chin.

As for the HAG, he tries vainly to repair the perforated piping by plugging a finger in the hole.

Mrs Sarah looks around the room but visibly she has decided that she is unable to understand what is going on.

- Let's proceed by order, suggests ISAAC. First, tell me if GAMAL EL DIN advised you that I was not returning home for supper.

- Yes, he gave me your letter... but please, explain...

- My letter ? What letter ? I don't remember writing a letter to you...But after all, it's possible that I gave him a letter for you. In any case, I wanted to let you know that I was invited to celebrate the "imminent-engagement" of this charming young couple.

- A very strange celebration, mutters Mrs Sarah. Then, looking at ISAAC, she asks :

- You are pale ISAAC. Are you sick ? Don't you feel well ?

- Don't worry, Penguin. At a certain moment this evening, I was not feeling too well. But my friends have taken good care of me.

Mrs Sarah gapes at her husband :

- But your letter ? Your departure from Egypt... I cannot understand...

You are here in front of me but you are not explaining the contents of your letter.

Nobody speaks and suddenly a complete silence falls on the audience like a magic cloak.

Mrs Sarah opens her handbag and gives the letter to ISAAC.

- Did you write this note ?

While ISAAC examines the letter the silence is maintained but GAMAL EL DIN is seen gaining slowly the front door of the flat.

The marriage broker returns the letter to his wife.

- This letter has been written by me. Don't you recognize my handwriting ?

Everybody then breathes more freely and ZEINAB suggests :

- Do you want a mint tea ?

Mrs Sarah doesn't answer and asks icily :

- What about this departure for Israël ?

The silence falls again and gains everybody. ABOU ZEID, panic stricken,

looks at his uncle MOHAMMED. GAMAL EL DIN is now very near the door and he

has only a movement to do to find himself outside the flat.

ISAAC asks :

- What departure for Israël ?

Mrs Sarah replies firmly :

- You are stating in your letter that you are leaving for Israël.

- Can I see this note once more ? asks ISAAC.

And this time, he takes out his glasses from his pocket and examines the letter again, then he returns the letter to Mrs Sarah and confirms :

- This note is effectively in my handwriting.

A general sigh of content echoes the cry of despair coming from Mrs Sarah.

ISAAC adds :

- This letter is in my handwriting but I haven't written it.

And he turns towards GAMAL EL DIN who gropes for the door which will help him to escape from this nightmare in less than a second.

ISAAC continues in the same tone :

- And if I'm here with you, you can conclude that I have not left for Israël...

ALY MANSOUR, who takes this statement for a joke, chuckles.

But looking at the faces of his friends, his grin disappears immediately.

HAG AHMED stammers :

- We can explain. It's easy to understand...

Everybody looks at him and he concludes pitifully.

- And the whole explanation shall be given to you by Uncle MOHAMMED.
Then,

he starts a short prayer evidencing that the explanation shall not be given
by him.

Uncle MOHAMMED is thinking intensively. GAMAL EL DIN has seized the
handle

of the front door of the flat and can now disappear . Both ISAAC and Mrs
Sarah are standing too far away to stop him.

This is the moment chosen by ISAAC to ask seriously :

- Is the whole matter a joke ?

- A joke ? stammers GAMAL EL DIN.

- A joke ! cries ABOU ZEID whose face breaks in numerous wrinkles of joy.

- A joke ! yells Uncle MOHAMMED with a wonderful grin distorting his face.

That's the reason for this letter.

And turning towards GAMAL EL DIN, he asks severely :

- Why do you play such pranks on Mrs Sarah ?

- Then this note was a joke ? questions ISAAC.

- For me, all this looks very fishy.

- It's just a very stupid joke, states Uncle MOHAMMED with a stern voice.

- This man is a donkey ! notices ALY MANSOUR.

And everybody approves whilst GAMAL EL DIN starts rolling his bulging eyes

very stupidly.

- Silence, orders ISAAC.

He then pursues with a softer voice.

- The reason of this letter is unimportant. But this letter itself is important.

- What do you mean ?

ISAAC smiles and looks at Mrs Sarah.

- Penguin... do you still want to leave for Israël ? Please, answer me !

- Yes, stammers Mrs Sarah.... but I don't understand...

- I shall explain. This note proves the genius of our friend GAMAL EL DIN who is far from stupid.

- But I am stupid, insists the scribe still rolling his bulging eyes.

- GAMAL, stop being foolish, orders Uncle MOHAMMED and listen to ISAAC.

The marriage broker pursues :

- If the scribe has managed to forge a letter which I have witnessed to be in my handwriting, this means that he can prepare for us a couple of false visas on two false passports like the document he forged some years ago with the seal of RAMSES II on a parchment exposed since in a british museum.

- Then, you are ready to help us to leave Egypt for Israël ? asks Mrs Sarah.

Turning towards GAMAL, ISAAC insists :

- Oh, scribe... the moment has come when you should stop your pranks and concentrate on preparing for us the two passports with the corresponding visas. Do you accept, oh scribe, to help us ?

GAMAL EL DIN straightens up proudly :

- It's a childish game for somebody who has already forged 300 000 passports for 300 000 Jews sweating terribly while digging the earth of Israël.

- Poor people, mutters GABER. How tiring...

- You are truly a man, GAMAL, states Mrs Sarah looking at the scribe admiringly but do you accept to help us with these passports ?

- Yes, replies GAMAL.

- But how much money would you require ?

ABOU ZEID cups up his hand before his ear. Sohad and ABDEL HAMID whisper together :

- Our dowry...

And the HAG hums happily :

- And the donation for the Attarine Mosque...

But GAMAL EL DIN replies proudly :

- For you those visas shall be free of charge. Friends do not pay !

Eight sighs of dismay escape from eight breasts echoing like punctured tyres.

ISAAC protests :

- I refuse your present. I'm your friend but I shall pay.

- No ! answers the scribe.

- I insist, says Mrs Sarah.

- We insist, whispers ABOU ZEID.

- ISAAC shall pay you only 100 Pounds, only for the dowry ... whispers the hairdresser but so quietly that nobody hears him except the HAG AHMED sitting next to him who whispers :

- No, 200 Pounds including the donation for the Attarine mosque, but GAMAL EL DIN still refuses very strongly a payment for the passports.

- In that case, suggests ISAAC, I shall give the HAG 100 Pounds for a donation for the Attarine mosque.

- Thank you, stammers the HAG

- And I shall offer 100 Pounds to the "imminent-engaged-couple" for their future marriage.

- My dowry, cries Sohad happily.

- We owe you such a present, declare together ISAAC and Mrs Sarah, to thank you for your kindness.

- Tomorrow, promises the scribe, you shall have your two passports with two visas. Two real masterpieces...

- And after tomorrow, we shall leave for Israël.

- You shall leave and we shall all regret you, concludes ABOU ZEID with tears in his eyes.

CHAPTER 23

Living since over one year in Israël, ISAAC and Mrs Sarah often speak nostalgically of Egypt and of their friends.

ISAAC is not digging the soil of the promised land. As mentioned by GABER, this work is indeed too tiring and ISAAC has preferred to organize a flourishing printing business for the translation of the Gospel in Hebrew and the sale of this translated Gospel throughout the world.

It is said that the Pope himself keeps a copy of this translation on his bedside table.

During this time, meetings continue to take place at the Abdallah coffee place, Attarine street in Alexandria.

Last meeting took place this morning when Uncle MOHAMMED announced, gloating happily :

- I'm leaving for my pilgrimage to Mecca. Nothing can stop me. I managed to close yesterday a very important business with a peasant arriving from upper Egypt.

- Was your customer honest this time ? asks ALY ZEIDAN.

- Judge yourselves, answers Uncle MOHAMMED, displaying on the table hundreds of bank notes.

- One must believe in human nature, states sententiously the HAG with a

loud approving burp.

- Can you lend me 100 Pounds ? asks ABOU ZEID.

- Ayou my nephew... you have become insane ! answers Uncle MOHAMMED

burying hastily the bank notes in his gallabeya. First, I don't have so

much money and even if I had 100 Pounds I wouldn't lend you such an amount.

- It's for my shop, explains blushing the Attarine bull with a meek smile.

- What shop, oh man ?

- A hairdresser shop where we could sell also perfumes for the ladies and where ABDEL HAMID could work.

- But you, ABOU ZEID, what shall you do in such a shop ?

- I shall be the cashier, replies ABOU ZEID.

And while everybody bursts out laughing, a newcomer enters the coffee shop and calls ABDALLAH.

- A coffee I want !

He bows, then politely introduces himself.

- HAGOP HAGOPIAN

And he adds very friendly :

- Shoemaker I am with a beautiful new shop in Attarine street.

- At coffee Abdallah, this your first visit ? asks Uncle MOHAMMED using

unintentionally the manner of speaking of the Egyptian Armenians.

- Yes, first visit, replies pleasantly the shoemaker.

- I'm nearly in the same business, announces ALY ZEIDAN the shoe shiner.

The face of Uncle MOHAMMED pleats in numerous wrinkles of joy and pointing

out at the shoemaker, he whispers to his nephew :

- Here is your hairdresser store !

And he asks :

- Do you think that ZEINAB can organize a special supper for us tonight ?

But it's GOMAA the sweeper who replies :

- Am I invited ?

With his imploring face and the yellow mucus sliding down from his nose, the sweeper presents a touching picture.

- Why not ? answers Uncle MOHAMMED and addressing then the Armenian, he

asks ceremoniously :

- Do you like melohia, ya Bey ?

And the answer to this question figures in another story....

EPILOGUE

Attarine is first an original story with strange characters and also

unusual feelings drawn in and out of common setting where the author guides

us in a picturesque and coloured atmosphere which should be accepted with the normal gratefulness due to healthy entertainment.

As a matter of fact, what is healthier than the situation created by Robert Schinasi?

ABOU ZEID learns that his daughter SOHAD is pregnant and the father of her future child is ABDEL HAMID, the young hairdresser who is placed before two options : either marry SOHAD or be murdered by ABOU ZEID's friends who

are very touchy regarding honour problems.

ABDEL HAMID prefers the first solution assorted with the payment of a dowry of 100 Pounds increased to 200 Pounds for a donation to the Attarine mosque.

Nobody possessing such an important amount ...

This book relates the mad adventures of the gang of ABOU ZEID 's friends who have decided to kill ISAAC, the jewish marriage broker and obtain from this murder the necessary funds to save the honour of ABDEL HAMID and SOHAD.

The author describes to you the swarming atmosphere of an Egypt hardly known which will help you to burst into a gigantic laughter as strong and generous as the characters of this book.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

ABOU ZEID.....	street porter
Uncle MOHAMMED.....	swindler
ZEINAB.....	his wife
Uncle MOHAMMED.....	swindler
SOHAD and ABDEL HAMID.....	"the imminent-engaged-couple"
ISAAC.....	marriage broker
Mrs SARAH.....	his wife
RACHEL.....	a friend of Mrs. Sarah
ALY MANSOUR.....	garbage man
FATMA.....	his favorite wife
MUSTAPHA.....	the monkey exhibitor
RAOUF CHERIF.....	income tax inspector
HAG AHMED.....	doorkeeper of the Attarine mosque
MUSTAPHA CHAWKAT.....	cigarette end picker
ALY ZEIDAN.....	shoe shiner
GAMAL EL DIN.....	public scribe
GOMAA.....	sweeper
GABER.....	cart hauler
ABOU ZEID.....	street porter