

THE STREAM OF DAYS

by
Taha Hussein





AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

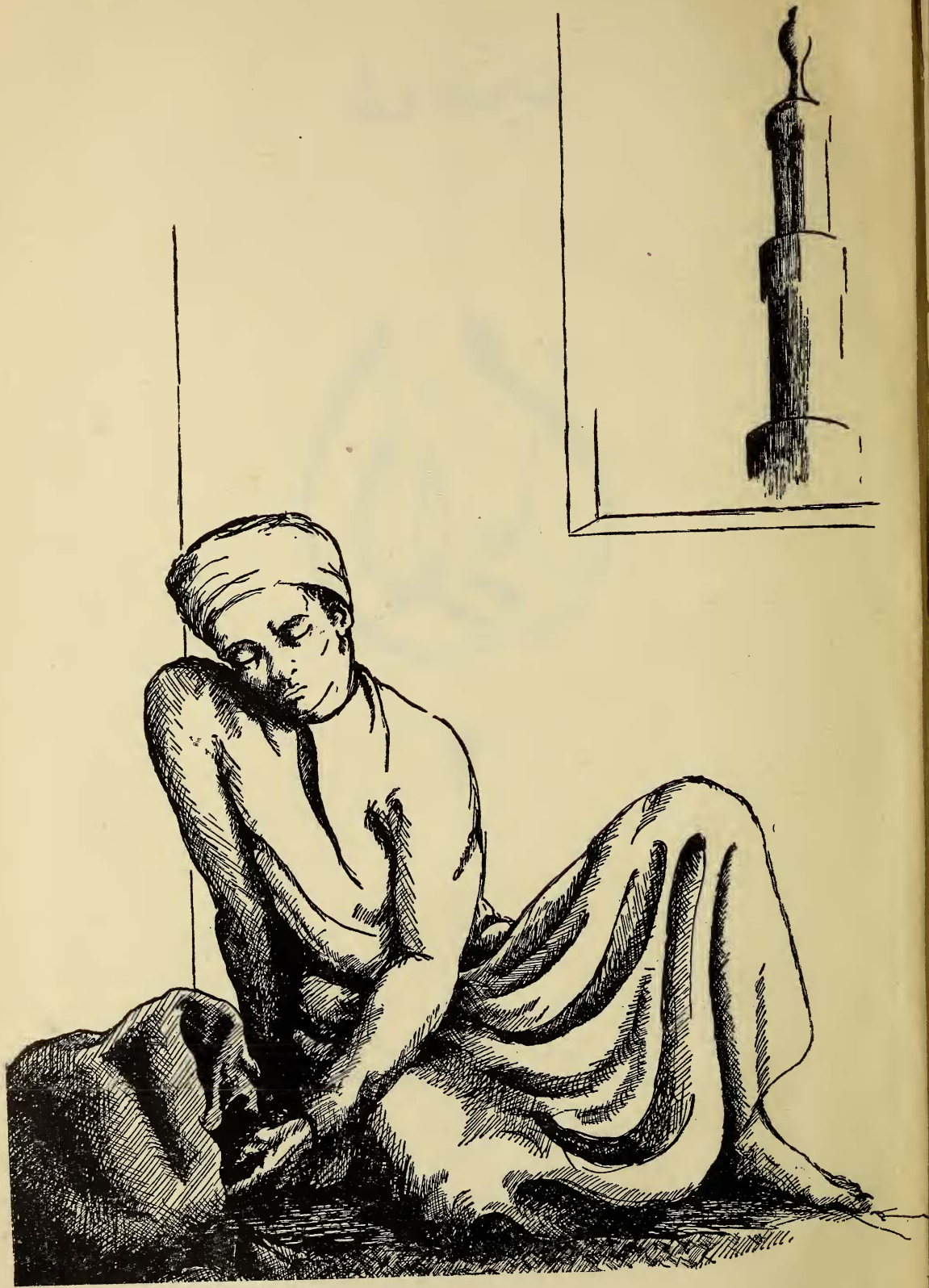
C.1

Fa
ba

طَهَّ مَبِين



٢



THE
STREAM OF DAYS

A Student at the Azhar

by

TAHA HUSSEIN

translated by

HILARY WAYMENT

Illustrated by

BILLEE BUTLER



LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.

LONDON ◊ NEW YORK ◊ TORONTO

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO. LTD.
6 & 7 CLIFFORD STREET, LONDON, W.1
NICOL ROAD, BOMBAY 1
17 CHITTARANJAN AVENUE, CALCUTTA 13
36A MOUNT ROAD, MADRAS 2
LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO. INC.
55 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK 3
LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
215 VICTORIA STREET, TORONTO 1

First published in Arabic by Al-Maaref, Cairo, 1939
Published as *Le Livre des Jours, II*, tr. Gaston
Wiet, by *La Revue du Caire*, 1940
First published in English by Al-Maaref, 1943
Second edition, revised, 1948

HV
2335
H
copy one



CODE NUMBER: 12425

Printed in Great Britain by Western Printing Services, Ltd., Bristol

INTRODUCTION

TAHA HUSSEIN'S autobiography is one of the acknowledged masterpieces of contemporary Arabic literature. This second volume, describing the years of his adolescence at the Azhar, stands by itself as an enthralling picture of student life in the Egypt of a generation ago, and the record of an unusually gifted personality in the process of formation and growth. For the English reader, however, it needs to be prefaced by some account both of earlier and later events in the author's life and of the background against which they took place.

An Egyptian Childhood, as the first volume has been entitled in English,¹ tells the story of the author's early years in the Upper Egyptian village where he was born. But the book is remarkable not so much for its Egyptian background as for the faithfulness and intensity with which it expresses the pathos of a life apparently blighted from the beginning by blindness. We see the boy gradually and with difficulty becoming aware of the world around him, and more than making up by means of imagination for what he misses through lack of sight. He goes to school, and oscillates like any other boy between work and play, success and humiliation. He learns the Koran by heart prodigiously early, only to forget it again at the crucial moment when his father surprises him with a test. But in the end his ambitions are realised, and at the age of thirteen he is sent up to Cairo, in an elder brother's charge, to study at the Moslem University of El-Azhar; and this is where the first book ends and the second begins.

The Azhar at this time was in a critical phase of its existence. Founded as long ago as 970, the mosque had early gained a high reputation as a school of Islamic studies, and for many centuries following upon the Mongol invasion in the East and the decline of Islam in the West its supremacy

¹ Taha Hussein: *An Egyptian Childhood*, tr. E. H. Paxton. (Routledge, 1932.)

remained unrivalled. During the period of Turkish and Mameluke rule, however, that is to say from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, it shared in the general decline of Islamic learning, and was reduced to a sterile repetition of scholastic dogma. The traditional sciences, based on divine revelation, and therefore exempt from criticism, became firmly established as the basis of Azharite study. The chief of these are four in number: (1) *Hadith*, the body of tradition which apart from the Koran is the chief source of our knowledge of the Prophet and his teaching. The study of *hadith* involves examination not only of the text but also of the authorities by whom each tradition was handed down. (2) *Tafsîr*, or interpretation of the Koran. (3) *First Principles*, or the fundamentals of law, which represent the basis of agreement between the four schools of law, or rites of orthodox Islam, the Hanafite, Shâfi'ite, Mâlikite and Hanbalite. (4) *Tawhîd*, or doctrine of the One God.

After the "traditional" sciences came the so-called "rational" sciences, such as grammar, syntax, prosody, rhetoric and logic. Astronomy was studied mainly for practical ends, and in no adventurous spirit; while the other physical sciences, and mathematics, in which Islam once led the world, had gone the way of history, geography and literature, and fallen into almost complete neglect. The impact of western civilisation on Egypt, however, from the end of the eighteenth century could not fail in the end, one way or another, to have a profound effect on the Azhar. Both Moham-mad 'Aly and Isma'îl Pasha made attempts at reform, which met with stiff resistance from the majority of the sheikhs, and were only very partially successful.

In the last thirty years of the nineteenth century, however, two great men arose in Egypt who were to have a lasting influence on its thought and life.¹ El-Sayyid Jamâl-ed-Dîn El-Afghâny arrived in Cairo in 1871, at a moment when Egypt, as a result of its colossal indebtedness to British and French bankers, was threatened not only with bankruptcy, but also with the loss of its independence. Jamâl, who had already struggled for the liberation of the Moslem peoples in Afghanistan, Persia, India and Turkey, now became the in-

¹ C. C. Adams: *Islam and Modernism in Egypt*. (Oxford, 1933.)

tellecual leader of the Young Egyptian Movement, which eleven years later, after his own departure, was to make an unsuccessful resistance, under the military leadership of 'Arâby Pasha, to the British occupation. During his eight years' stay in Cairo he was able, by his mastery of the Islamic sciences and the new message he drew from them for his own age, to start a considerable movement for reform which embraced every department of Egyptian life, social, political and religious. After his expulsion in 1879 the leadership was taken over by his pupil and close friend Muhammad 'Abdu.

Jamâl was a man of restless revolutionary spirit, 'Abdu a patient but energetic reformer. Jamâl stayed no more than eight years in Egypt, whereas 'Abdu, the son of a fellah, spent most of his life in the land of his birth. Jamâl was able to influence only a small group of Azharites, and found a much more fertile field for his ideas among the westernising effendiat. 'Abdu, though in many ways more influential in secular than in religious affairs, struggled for years to reform the Azhar, which he regarded as the essential preliminary to religious and social reform in the world of Islam.

At the time of Jamâl's expulsion from Egypt in 1879 'Abdu was a young man of thirty who had already shown remarkable abilities. He had early turned away from the sterility of traditional Islamic studies and given himself up to mysticism. Jamâl had drawn him back to the real world, brought him into contact with Western ideas and interested him in the contemporary problems of Egypt and Islam. 'Abdu was in fact Jamâl's leading disciple, and as such was removed from his post at the *Dar el-'Ulûm*¹ at the same time as his master was dismissed the country. The next year, however, under a more liberal ministry he was made editor of the official Egyptian chronicle (*El-Waqâ'i' El-Misriya*), which he made the mouthpiece of his programme for the liberation of the Moslem peoples and the renovation of Islam from within by methods of gradual reform and through moral and religious education. His gradualism made him an uneasy yoke-fellow of the militaristic nationalists under 'Arâby Pasha, though he supported them as far as he felt himself

¹ Training college for teachers of Arabic.

able, and suffered exile with their leaders after the débâcle of 1882.

In 1888 he was recalled from exile, and during the seventeen years which followed he led a life of ceaseless and many-sided activity. On his arrival he was made a judge in the native tribunals, and in 1899 he rose to the position of Grand Mufti of Egypt, or supreme official interpreter in the country of the canon law of Islam. In this quality he was not content with a passive acceptance of tradition, but exercised a liberal independence of judgment which marked him out from other holders of the post. In the same year he was made a member of the Legislative Council, and devoted much time and energy to the efficient working of this body, which he saw as an important first stage on the road to independence and representative government, as opposed either to European control or an oriental despotism. At the same time he was making considerable efforts to renovate the Arabic language, as the indispensable basis of an Islamic revival.

It is as an educational reformer, however, that 'Abdu interests us most. Believing as he did that the essential foundation of social progress in Egypt and the Islamic countries in general was religious, moral and educational reform, he naturally turned to the most influential educational institution in the world of Islam as a means of carrying his ideals into practice. He desired to break down the dead traditionalism of the Azhar, and to infuse new life into it by a return to the simplicity and earnestness of early Islam, combined with a genuine assimilation of all that was best in Western science. He saw no incompatibility between religion and science; on the contrary he declares with Bacon that the investigation of nature must lead not only to the material benefit of man, but to a deeper knowledge of God.

In the year 1894 his hopes seemed well on the way to fulfilment when an Administrative Council was constituted under his leadership and at his suggestion to carry out reforms at the Azhar. During the course of the next eleven years he succeeded through this council in putting some of his ideas into execution. He was not Rector, and had to meet stiff resistance from the majority of the sheikhs, despite the fact that one of his first moves was to increase their salaries

and allowances. He also improved the living conditions of the students, reorganised the libraries, reformed the administration, tightened up teaching regulations, and lengthened the university year. He thus succeeded in raising the number of candidates presenting themselves for the doctor's degree from an average of three yearly to nearly a hundred. As for the curriculum itself, he managed to add a number of modern subjects—mathematics, Islamic history, composition, geography, literature—some of which had to be taken by every student in addition to the traditional sciences.

Nevertheless these achievements were small compared either with his efforts or his hopes. The resistance of the conservatives finally came to a head, and a movement was fomented against Muhammad 'Abdu which culminated in his resignation from the Administrative Council. A few months afterwards, in July 1905, he died.

Muhammad 'Abdu was an outstanding figure in his generation, and his influence is discernible in almost all the great men of the next. Muhammad Rashîd Rida, in the review *El-Manâr*, carried on his efforts for a religious revival. Ahmad Fathy Zaghoul pushed his efforts at law reform a stage further by his study and dissemination of European legal theory. In politics the great Sa'ad Zaghoul (brother of the latter), who led the struggle for Egyptian independence after the war of 1914–1918, was deeply influenced by Muhammad 'Abdu.

It was Sa'ad who with two other men mentioned in this book, Qâsim Amîn the feminist and Lutfy el-Sayyid the liberal journalist and scholar, took what 'Abdu's experience pointed to as logically the next step. 'Abdu had failed to modernise the Azhar; very well, they would found a secular university which should be modern from the start. It was to create a new synthesis between the Egyptian nationalist revival and occidental culture, in a much freer atmosphere than the Azhar could afford, that the Egyptian University was founded in 1908, only three years after 'Abdu's death.

The critical years from 1902 to 1910 are those covered by this book. Taha Hussein arrived at the Azhar when Muhammad 'Abdu (called here "the Imam," or "Leader of the Congregation") was still lecturing there, and serving on the Administrative Council. Taha never met the Imam, but he

makes us conscious throughout the book of his immense prestige and influence. The boy's growing disillusionment with the Azhar leads him first to those liberal sheikhs such as Marsafy who had enjoyed the encouragement and favour of the Imam, and later to those "wearers of the tarboush" outside the Azhar whom he soon recognised as the Imam's most faithful followers and the truest inheritors of his spirit.

All this is of the greatest interest to those who are familiar with the author's subsequent history: how he won a doctorate at the Sorbonne, and became one of the first Egyptians to apply scientific methods of analysis to Arabic literature; how his daring innovations involved him in a *cause célèbre* with the Rector of the Azhar; how he became Dean of the Faculty of Arts at Gîza, whose academic independence he defended against the attacks of reaction; how, finally, as Director of General Culture and Acting Under-Secretary of State for Education, he was largely responsible for the creation of the new Farouk I University at Alexandria, of which he acted as Rector during the first two years of its existence.

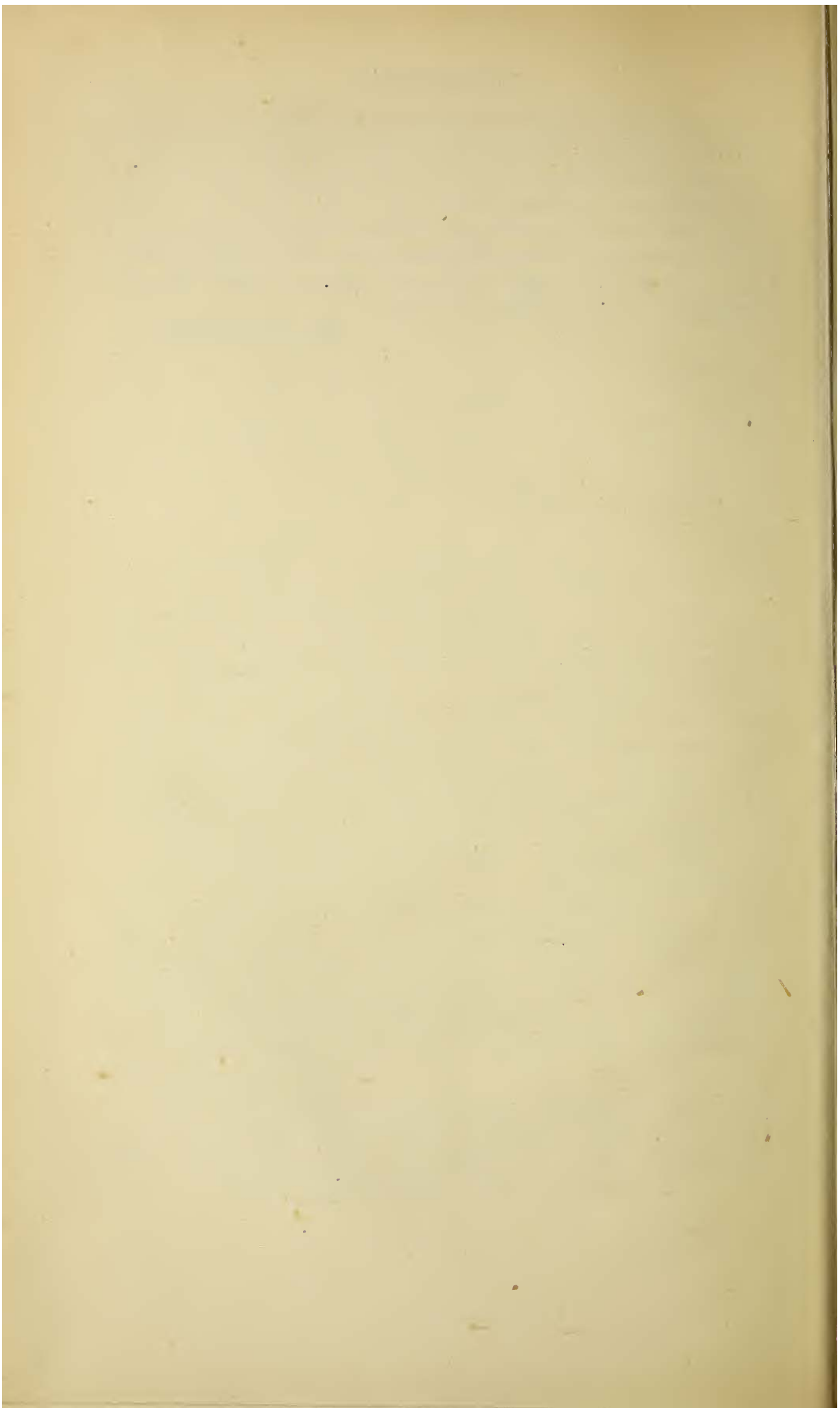
But it is not so much the educationist that we meet here as the writer and the man. A summary account of the modern cultural movement in Egypt was necessary in order to bring out the wider significance of the later chapters of the book, which, as one reviewer¹ has pointed out, are reminiscent of nothing so much as of the clash between humanism and scholasticism in the universities of fifteenth-century Europe. The earlier part of the book stands firmly by its own merits as a description of the student *milieu* into which Taha was thrown at the age of thirteen. It is a series of thoroughly Egyptian portraits; yet there is so much universality in them that at many points in the story Englishmen will seem to relive their own boyhood and youth, at school or university. As the days pass on, we escape from the constriction of childhood into the freedom of adult life, but what we learn meanwhile about human nature may make us wiser, but cannot help saddening us too.

A few words about the translation. Taha Hussein's style has become a byword for charm and grace, and it is indeed rash to attempt to render its qualities in English. I have tried

¹ Richard Capell, in *Citadel*. (Cairo, October 1943.)

to avoid literal translation, which only results in a sort of spurious local colour such as hinders genuine comprehension. The graceful assonances and repetitions of the original have also disappeared, though I can only hope that some of its charm remains. The translation has been checked for accuracy by Dr. Mohamed 'Awad Mohamed and Mlle Amina Taha-Hussein, and for fluency by Duncan Macrae Taylor. To all of these my warmest thanks are due.

HILARY WAYMENT



I

FOR the first two or three weeks of his stay in Cairo he was lost in bewilderment. All he knew was that he had left the country behind him and settled in the capital as a student attending lectures at the Azhar. It was more by imagination than by sense that he distinguished the three phases of his day.

Both the house he lived in and the path that led to it were strange and unfamiliar. When he came back from the Azhar he turned to the right through a gateway which was open during the daytime and shut at night; after evening prayer there was only a narrow opening left in the middle of the door. Once through it, he became aware of a gentle heat playing on his right cheek, and a fine smoke teasing his nostrils; while on the left he heard an odd gurgling sound which at once puzzled and delighted him.

For several days, morning and evening, he listened curiously to this sound, but lacked the courage to inquire what it might be. Then one day he gathered from a chance remark that it came from the bubbling of a *narghile*¹ smoked by tradesmen of the district. It was provided for them by the proprietor of the café from which the gentle heat and the fine smoke-cloud issued.

He walked straight on for a few steps before crossing a damp, roofed-in space in which it was impossible to stand firmly because of the slops thrown there by the café proprietor. Then he came out into an open passage-way; but this was narrow and filthy and full of strange, elusive smells, which were only moderately unpleasant early in the day and at nightfall, but as the day advanced and the heat of the sun grew stronger, became utterly intolerable.

He walked straight on through this narrow passage; but rarely did he find it smooth or easy. More often than not his

¹ A water pipe, similar to a hookah.

friend would have to push him either this way or that so as to avoid some obstacle or other. Then he would continue in the new direction, feeling his way towards a house either to left or right, until he had passed the obstacle and taken the old direction again. He hurried along nervously at his companion's side, breathing the nauseous smells, and half-deafened by the medley of sounds that came from all sides at once, left and right, above and below, to meet in mid-air, where they seemed to unite above the boy's head, layer upon layer, into a single fine mist.

There was in fact a remarkable variety of sounds. Voices of women raised in dispute, of men shouting in anger or peaceably talking together; the noise of loads being set down or picked up; the song of the water-carrier crying his wares; the curse of a carter to his horse or mule or donkey; the grating sound of cart-wheels; and from time to time this confused whirl of sounds was torn by the braying of a donkey or the whinnying of a horse.

As he passed through this babel, his thoughts were far away, and he was scarcely conscious of himself or of what he was doing; but at a certain point on the road he caught the confused sound of conversation through a half-open door on the left; then he knew that a pace or two further on he must turn to the left up a staircase which would bring him to his lodging.

It was an ordinary sort of staircase, neither wide nor narrow, and its steps were of stone; but since it was used very frequently in both directions, and no one troubled to wash or sweep it, the dirt piled up thickly and stuck together in a compact mass on the steps, so that the stone was completely covered up, and whether you were going up or coming down the staircase appeared to be made of mud.

Now whenever the boy went up or down a staircase he was obliged to count the steps. But long as were the years he stayed in this place, and countless the times he negotiated this staircase, it never occurred to him to count the number of its steps. He learnt at the second or third time of climbing it that after going up a few steps he had to turn a little to the left before continuing his ascent, leaving on his right an opening through which he never penetrated, though he knew

that it led to the first floor of the building in which he lived for so many years.

This floor was not inhabited by students, but by workers and tradesmen. He left the entrance to it on his right, and went on up to the second floor. There his harassed spirit found rest and relief; lungfuls of fresh air drove away the sense of suffocation with which he had been oppressed on that filthy staircase; and then too there was the parrot, whistling on without a break, as if to testify before all the world to the tyranny of her Persian master, who had imprisoned her in an abominable cage, and would sell her tomorrow or the day after to another man who would treat her in exactly the same way. And when he was rid of her and had laid hands on the cash, he would buy a successor for her who would be cooped up in the same prison pouring forth the same curses on her master, and waiting as her sister had waited to be passed on from hand to hand, and from cage to cage, while everywhere she went that plaintive cry of hers would delight the hearts of men and women.

When our friend reached the top of the staircase he breathed in the fresh air that blew on his face, and listened to the voice of the parrot calling him towards the right. He obeyed, turning through a narrow corridor, past two rooms in which two Persians lived. One of these was still a young man, while the other was already past middle age. The one was as morose and misanthropic as the other was genial and good-natured.

At last the boy was home. He entered a room like a hall, which provided for most of the practical needs of the house. This led on to another room, large but irregular in shape, which served for social and intellectual needs. It was bedroom and dining-room, reading-room and study, and a room for conversation by day or by night. Here were books and crockery and food; and here the boy had his own particular corner, as in every room he occupied or visited at all frequently.

This place of his was on the left inside the door. After advancing a pace or two he found a mat spread on the ground, and above that an old but quite serviceable carpet. Here he sat in the daytime, and here he slept at night, with a pillow for his head and a rug to cover him. On the opposite side of

the room was his elder brother's pitch, a good deal higher than his own. He had a mat spread on the ground, and a decent carpet on top of that, then a felt mattress, and above that a long, wide piece of bedding stuffed with cotton, and finally, crowning all, a coverlet. Here the young sheikh¹ would sit with his close friends. They were not obliged to prop up their backs against the bare wall, as the boy did, having cushions to pile up on the rugs. At night this couch was transformed into a bed on which the young sheikh slept.

¹ The word *sheikh* means originally "old man" or "elder." In this translation it is used in two senses: (1) as more or less equivalent to '*âlim*, "doctor," and so teacher at the Azhar; (2) "scholar" or aspirant to learning, as here.

II

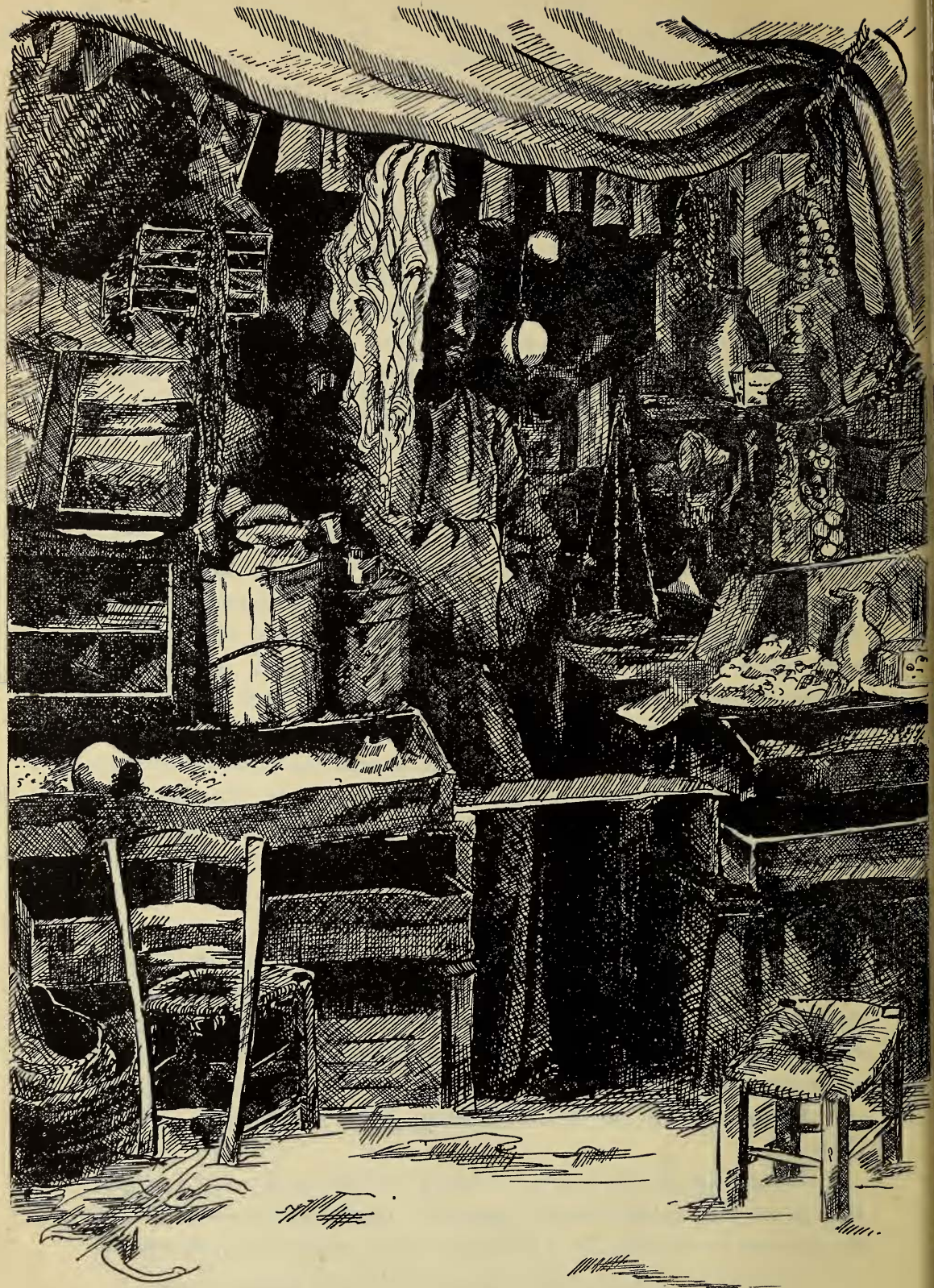
THIS was all the boy ever learnt about his immediate surroundings. The second phase of his life consisted in the tumultuous journey between his home and the Azhar. He went out through the covered passage till he felt the heat of the café on his left cheek, and heard the bubbling of the *narghile* on his right. In front of him was a shop which played an important part in his life; it belonged to El-Hagg Firûz, who supplied the neighbourhood with most of the necessities of life. In the morning he sold boiled beans,¹ prepared in the usual variety of ways. But El-Hagg Firûz used to boast the special virtues of his beans—and raise their prices accordingly. He had plain beans, beans in fat, beans in butter beans in every kind of oil; he added, if required, all sorts of spices. As for the students, they adored these beans, and often made far too large a meal of them. So by mid-morning they were already dull in the head, and at the noon lecture they slept.

When evening came El-Hagg Firûz sold his customers their supper: cheese, olives, milled sesame, or honey. To the more luxurious he supplied boxes of tunny or sardines. And to a few of them perhaps, as night approached, he sold things which have no name, and nothing to do with food, things spoken of in a whisper, yet passionately vied for.

The boy used to overhear these whisperings; sometimes he half understood, but as a rule the whole transaction was a mystery to him. As the days passed by and he grew older, he came to see through these subtle hints and ambiguities. What he learnt then obliged him to overhaul his standards of judgment, and to revise his valuation both of people and of things.

El-Hagg Firûz was a tall, jet-black fellow, and anything but talkative. But when he did speak he mumbled his words and lisped out his Arabic in a fashion which made an ineffaceable

¹ *Fool*, the brown bean which is the staple diet of the Egyptian masses.



impression on the boy. He is always reminded of it by the story of Ziad and his pupil in *El-Bayan wal-Tabyîn*.¹ Ziad asked his pupil to say: "We have been given a pony." Instead of which he repeated it so: "We have been given a bony." "Wretch!" said Ziad, annoyed. "If you can't say pony, say horse instead." Whereupon the boy replied: "We have been given an arse." Ziad, shocked, reverted to the "bony" as the lesser evil.

El-Hagg Firûz held a unique position in the neighbourhood and amongst the students especially. It was to him that they went when their money ran out towards the end of the month, or when their remittances were overdue. He it was who gave them food on credit, lent them a piastre or two from time to time, and helped them out in all kinds of emergencies. No wonder his name was as often on their lips as those of the most learned sheikhs of the Azhar.

But this was not all. El-Hagg Firûz was essential to the students in yet another way. It was to him that were addressed all the letters bringing them news of their families, or enclosing flimsy notes which they took to the post office with empty pockets, to return with the jingle of silver falling cheerily on their ears and into their very hearts.

Naturally not a single student missed an opportunity of passing the time of day morning and evening at El-Hagg Firûz' shop, or of casting a quick furtive glance at the spot where letters were waiting to be collected. How often one of them would go home grasping a sealed envelope which was spotted with oil and butter stains; yet despite its greasiness that envelope was more precious in his eyes than any composition or text-book on law, grammar or theology.

On leaving the covered passage, then, the boy found himself in front of El-Hagg Firûz' shop; his friend would take him a few paces in that direction to greet El-Hagg Firûz and to inquire if there was a letter for him or not; the reply would bring either smiles or frowns to his face. Then he turned away to the left, and walked straight forwards down the long narrow street crowded with passers-by. It was full of

¹ Book of *Exposition and Demonstration*: a treatise on rhetoric, constituting a huge anthology of Arab eloquence, by El-Jâhiz, a prolific and original author of the Basra school (ninth century).

students, merchants, tradesmen, labourers; carts drawn by donkeys, horses or mules; carters shouting out warnings or curses at the men, women or children blocking their path. Then on each side of the street were different kinds of shops, in many of which was prepared the meagre diet of the poor. The smells that issued from them were abominable, but that did not prevent them from delighting most of the passers-by, whether they were students, labourers or porters. Some of them turned aside to these shops and bought a scrap of food to gulp down on the spot, or take home and eat, either alone or with others. And some of them, assailed by this battery of smells, remained unmoved. They were tempted but did not yield. Their eyes saw, their nostrils smelt, their appetite was stirred; but, alas, their pockets were empty. They passed on with yearning in their souls and with bitterness and resentment in their hearts; yet at the same time they were content with their lot and accepted it with resignation.

In some other shops a quiet, unhurried trade was transacted, almost without any words passing at all. If anything was said, it was under the breath, so as scarcely to be heard. In spite of this—or perhaps for this very reason—the trade in question brought great wealth and prosperity to those who practised it. To all appearances the majority of these shops dealt only in coffee and soap, though some of them also sold sugar and rice.

As he passed through all this a warm interest stirred in the boy. But he would have understood practically nothing had not his friend from time to time volunteered an explanation. He continued on his way, sometimes walking firmly forwards, sometimes swerving aside. When the road was clear he marched with a sure step, but stumbled and faltered on its edges when it was crowded or twisty. At last he came to a spot where he had to turn a little to the left and then plunge into a lane as narrow and crooked and filthy as could be. Its atmosphere was foul with an abominable medley of smells, and from time to time weak, hollow voices which reflected its misery and wrong echoed back cries for charity to the foot-falls of passers-by, begging at the sound of steps, as if life had only been perceptible through the ears. They were answered by other voices: the thin, harsh, strangled cries of those

winged creatures which love darkness and desolation and ruins. Often enough these noises were accompanied by the flutter of wings, which sometimes, to his horror, shaved past his ear or his face. Instinctively his hand would fly up for protection, and for some time afterwards his heart would be throbbing with apprehension.

On he walked with his friend along this narrow, dark, twisting alley, now rising, now descending, now going straight on, now turning to left or right. And all the time these loathsome sounds assailed him, sometimes from in front, and sometimes from behind, but never without dismaying him. After a time he felt his heart lighten and his lungs expand, and knew that the moment of release had come. He heaved one sigh of relief, loaded with all the weight of his anxiety and distress.

Now he breathed freely and easily, as if he were taking in great draughts of life from the fresh air which flowed over him as he left the bat-ridden alley. On he went along the road, which twisted treacherously under his feet for a few moments, then became firm again so that he could step forward easily and with confidence. His heart thrilled with joy at the strange harmony of sounds which came to his ears as he walked along the pleasant, peaceful street. On one side of him was the Mosque of Sayyidna-l-Hussein,¹ and on the other a series of small shops. How often he would stop at one of these during the days that followed, and what good things he tasted there! Soaked figs and their juice in summertime, and in winter *bassbûssa*,² which diffused a warm glow of well-being through the body. Sometimes he would stop at a Syrian retailer's to choose from a variety of foods, hot or cold, salt or sweet. Their taste gave him inexpressible pleasure, yet if they were offered him now he would be afraid they might make him ill, or even poison him.

He continued along this street until he came to a place where the voices grew louder and more numerous. He realised that the roads divided here and that he could branch right or left, go straight on, or turn about. "Here are the cross-

¹ Sayyidna (lit. *Our Master*) Hussein was the grandson of the Prophet; he and his descendants were considered the true Caliphs by the Shi'ite ("separatist") sect, as opposed to the Sunnis (traditionalists). The mosque is of the Ottoman period.

² Nut-cake of Syrian origin.

roads," said his companion. "If you go right you reach the Sikka El-Gadida, then the Musky, then 'Ataba El-Khadra. To the left you have Sharia El-Darrâssa. But we must go straight on into Sharia El-Halwagi, the street of learning and hard work. It is so narrow that if you stretched out your arms left and right you could almost touch both walls. Now you are walking between a number of small bookshops. There are books of every kind in them, new and old, good and bad, in print or manuscript."

How many a pleasant and rewarding halt did our friend make in that narrow street, which remained fixed in his memory later on, after his life had changed its course.

But this time he must hurry past. His guide had to be at the Azhar before the lecture began. Here they were, arrived at the Barbers' Gate. He took off his sandals, laid them one on top of the other, then picked them up in his hand as he followed his companion. A little further on he stepped over a shallow threshold into the quiet courtyard of the Azhar, and felt a cool morning breeze blow refreshingly upon his face. And so he entered the third phase of this new life of his.

III

THIS third phase of his existence was the one he loved best of all. In his own room he endured all the pains of exile. It was like a foreign country to him, and he never became familiar with its contents, except perhaps those nearest to him. He did not live in it in the same sense that he had lived in his country home or in other familiar rooms where nothing was unknown to him. He passed his days there in exile from people and things alike, and in such anguish of heart that the oppressive air he breathed there brought him no rest or refreshment, but only heaviness and pain.

Nor was there any doubt of his preferring these hours in the Azhar to the agitated journey back and forth, whose hazards drove him almost to despair. It was not only his steps that were confused and unsteady; his very heart was overwhelmed by that unnerving perplexity which perverts a man's purposes and drives him blindly onwards, not only along the material road which he needs must follow, but also along the free paths of the mind, feckless and without a plan. Not only was he distracted by the hubbub and tumult that eddied around him. He was distressed at the unsteadiness of his walk and the impossibility of harmonising his own quiet, faltering steps with the firm and even brutal pace of his companion.

It was only in the third phase of his day that he found rest and security. The fresh breeze that blew across the court of the Azhar at the hour of morning prayer met him with a welcome and inspired him with a sense of security and hope. The touch of this breeze on his forehead, damp with sweat from that feverish journey, resembled nothing so much as the kisses his mother used to give him during his early years, when he chanted verses from the Koran to her, or entertained her with a story he had heard at the village school; or when, as a pale, delicate infant, he abandoned the corner in which he had been reciting the litany from the *sura* Ya-Sin to go and carry out some household task or other.

Those kisses revived his heart and filled him not only with tenderness but with hope and confidence. The breeze which welcomed him in the court of the Azhar, no less, brought rest after weariness, calm after tumult, a smile after gloomy looks. However, he as yet knew nothing of the Azhar, and had not the least idea what he would find there. But it was enough for him to brush with his bare feet the ground of that court, to feel on his face the caress of its morning breeze, and to realise that around him the Azhar was preparing to awake from its drowsiness, that its inertia would soon give place to activity. He began to recover consciousness of himself, as life returned to him. He felt the conviction of being in his own country, amongst his own people, and lost all sense of isolation, all sadness. His soul blossomed forth, and with every fibre of his being he yearned to discover . . . well, what? Something he was a stranger to, though he loved it and felt irresistibly drawn towards it—knowledge. How many times had he heard this word, and longed to find out its hidden meaning! His impression of it was vague enough, to be sure; but of this he was convinced, that knowledge had no limits and that people might spend their whole lives in acquiring a few drops of it. He too wished to devote his whole life to it and to win as much of it as he could, however little that might be. His father and the learned friends who came to visit him had spoken of knowledge as a boundless ocean, and the child had never taken this expression for a figure of speech or a metaphor, but as the simple truth. He had come to Cairo and to the Azhar with the intention of throwing himself into this ocean and drinking what he could of it, until the day he drowned. What finer end could there be for a man of spirit than to drown himself in knowledge? What a splendid plunge into the beyond!

All these thoughts suddenly thronged into his young spirit, filling it and taking possession of it, blotting out the memory of that desolate room, of the turbulent, twisty road, and even of the country and its delights. They convinced him that it was no mistake or exaggeration to be consumed with love for the Azhar as well as with regret for the country.

The boy paced on with his companion until he had crossed the court and mounted the shallow step which is the

threshold of the Azhar itself. His heart was all modesty and humility, but his soul was filled with glory and pride. His feet stepped lightly over the worn-out mats that were laid out across the floor, leaving a bare patch here and there, as if on purpose to touch the feet which passed over them with something of the benediction attached to that holy ground. The boy used to love the Azhar at this moment, when worshippers were finishing their early-morning prayer and going away, with the marks of drowsiness still in their eyes, to make a circle round some column or other and wait for the teacher who was to give a lecture on tradition or exegesis, first principles or theology.¹

At this moment the Azhar was quiet, and free from the strange intermingled murmurs that filled it from sunrise until evening prayer. You could only hear the whispered conversations of its inmates or the hushed but steady voice of some young man reciting the Koran. Or you might come upon a worshipper who had arrived too late for the common service, or had gone on to perform extra prayers after completing the statutory number. Or maybe you would hear a teacher beginning his lecture in the languid tone of a man who has awakened from sleep and said his prayers but has not yet eaten anything to give him strength and energy. He starts in a quiet, husky voice: "In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate: Praise be to God, father of the worlds. May His peace and blessing be upon our lord Muhammad, the most noble of the prophets, upon his family and his companions. These are the words of the author of the Book, may God rest his soul and grant us the fruits of his learning. Amen!"

The students listened to the lecture with the same quiet languor in which it was given. There was a striking contrast between the different tones the sheikhs used at the early-morning and midday lectures. At dawn their voices were calm and gentle, with traces of drowsiness in them. At noon they were strong and harsh, but fraught too with a certain sluggishness induced by the lunch they had just eaten, the baked beans and pickles and so on which made up the

¹ These are the four primary subjects of the traditional Azharite course (see introduction).

usual fare of an Azharite at this time. At dawn the voices seemed to beg humbly for favour from the great authorities of the past, while by noon they were attacking them almost as if they were adversaries. This contrast always astonished and delighted the boy.

On he went with his friend up the two steps leading into the *liwân*.¹ There beside one of those sacred pillars, to which a chair was bound by a great chain, our friend was deposited by his companion, who left him with these words: "Wait there and you will hear a lecture on tradition; when mine is over I will return and fetch you." His companion's lecture was on the first principles of Islamic law, given by Sheikh Râdy, God rest his soul. The text-book was the *Tahrîr* of El-Kemal Ibn El-Humam. When the boy heard this sentence, every word filled him at once with awe and curiosity. First principles of law? What science was this? Sheikh Râdy? Who could he be? *Tahrîr*?² What was the meaning of this word? El-Kemal Ibn El-Humam? Could there be a more wonderful pair of names? How true it was that knowledge is a boundless ocean, full of unimaginable benefit for any thoughtful being who is ready to plunge into it. The boy's admiration for this lecture especially grew deeper every day as he listened to his brother and his brother's friends studying their lesson beforehand. What they read sounded very strange, but there was no doubt of its fascination.

As he listened the boy used to burn with longing to grow six or seven years older, so that he might be able to understand it, to solve its riddles and ambiguities, to be master of the whole subject as those distinguished young men were, and to dispute with the teachers about it as they did. But for the present he was compelled to listen without understanding. Time and again he would turn over some sentence or other in his mind on the chance of finding some sense in it. But he achieved nothing by all this, except perhaps a greater respect for knowledge and a deeper reverence for his teachers, together with modesty as to his own powers and a determination to work harder.

¹ Colonnade surrounding the central court of the mosque.

² "Correct Reformulation" (of the first principles of law). The work was written in the fifteenth century.

There was one sentence in particular. How many sleepless nights it cost him! How many days of his life it overcast! Sometimes it tempted him to miss an elementary lecture—for he had understood his first lessons without difficulty—and so led him on to playing truant from the sheikh's lecture on tradition, in order to speculate on what he had heard from the lips of those older students.

The sentence which took possession of him in this way was certainly a remarkable one. It would fall echoing in his ears as he lay on the threshold of sleep, and drag him back to a wakefulness which lasted all night through. This was the sentence: "Right is the negation of negation." What could these words mean? How could negation be negated? What might such negation be? And how could the negation of negation be right?¹ The sentence began to whirl round in his head like the ravings of delirium in a sick man's brain, until one day it was driven out of his mind by one of El-Kafrawy's² *Problems*. This problem he understood at once and was able to argue about. Thus he came at last to feel that he had begun to taste the water of the boundless ocean of knowledge.

The boy sat beside the pillar, toying with the chain and listening to the sheikh on tradition. He understood him perfectly, and found nothing to criticise in his lesson except the cascade of names which he poured forth on his listeners in giving the source and authorities for each tradition. It was always "so-and-so tells us" or "according to so-and-so." The boy could not see the point of these endless chains of names, or this tedious tracing of sources. He longed for the sheikh to have done with all this and come down to the tradition itself. As soon as he did so the boy listened with all his heart. He memorised the tradition and understood it, but showed not the slightest interest in the sheikh's analysis, which reminded him too well of the explanations given by the Imam of the mosque in his country village and the sheikh who used to teach him the elements of law.

¹ As the context is legal, the sentence means: "Property is a counter-claim against a counter-claim," or the assertion of a right against all comers. In a different context the words might well mean: "Truth is the refutation of refutation," or the rebuttal of scepticism.

² An Azharite grammarian of the eighteenth century.

While the sheikh proceeded with his lesson the Azhar began gradually to wake up, as if stirred out of its torpor by the voices of the teachers holding forth, and by the discussions which arose between them and the students, amounting sometimes almost to quarrels. The students came closer, the voices rose higher, the echoes intermingled and the sheikhs raised their voices again, so that the students might be able to hear them, ever higher and higher, up to the final climax of the words "God is all-wise." For meanwhile other students had come up to wait for a lecture on law by another sheikh, or maybe the same one; so he had no choice but to end the early-morning lecture and begin the next. Then the boy's companion would return, take him by the hand without a word and drag him off all ungently to another place, where he dumped him like a piece of luggage and abandoned him again.

The boy realised that he had been transferred to the law class. He would listen to this lecture until it came to an end and both sheikhs and students went off. Then he would stay rooted to the spot until his friend came back from Sayyidna-l-Hussein, where he had been attending a lecture on law given by Sheikh Bakhât, God rest his soul.

Now Sheikh Bakhât was prolix in the extreme, and his students used to harass him with objections. So he never finished the lesson until the middle of the morning. Then the boy's companion would return to where he was, take him by the hand without a word and lead him out of the Azhar. And so back he went through the second phase along the road between the Azhar and his lodgings into the third and final phase, where he was left alone in his place in the corner on the old carpet stretched out over a rotten worn-out mat.

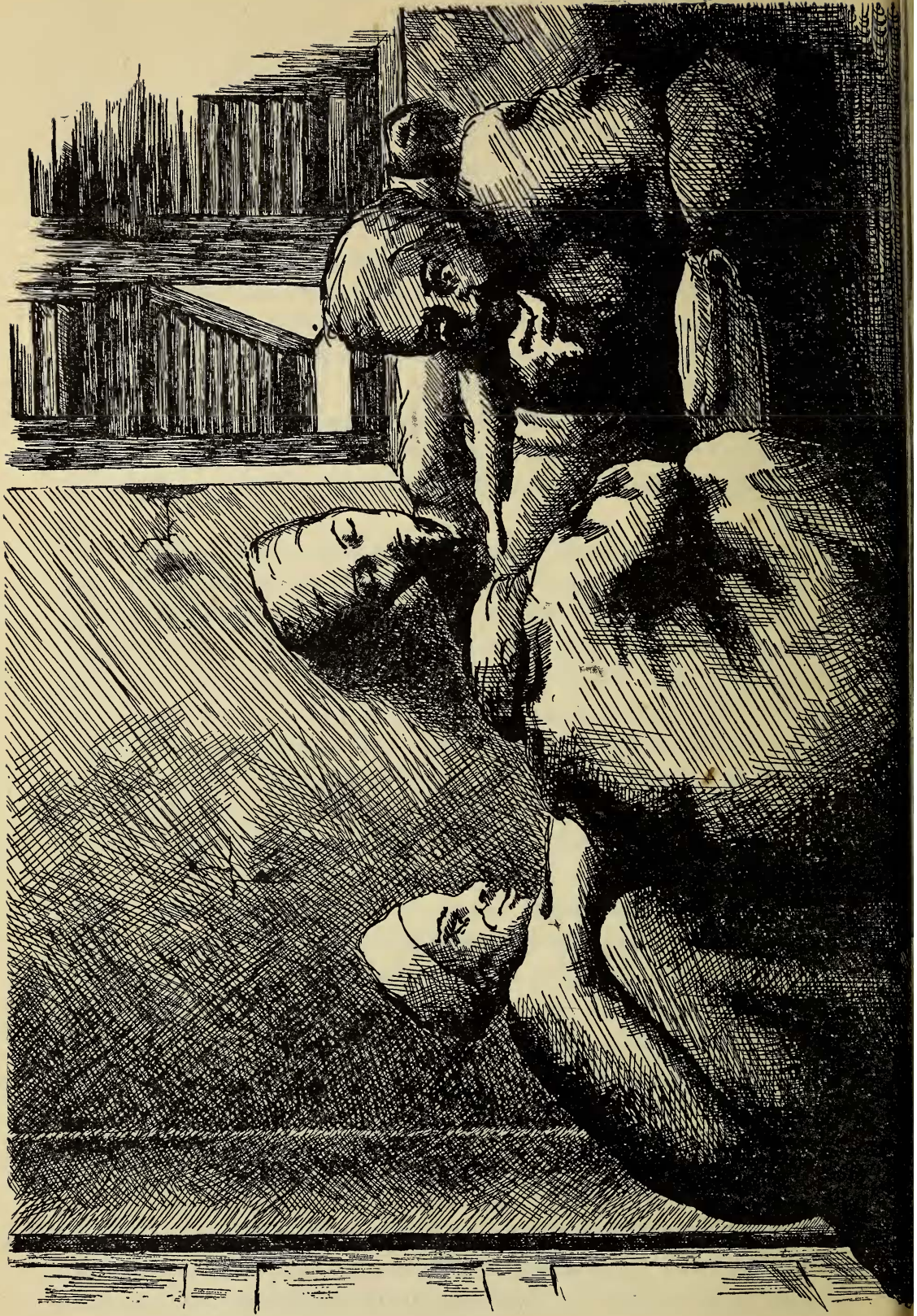
IV

THE boy sat down on this carpet in the corner of the room, resting his hand or arm on the window at his left. He had no time now to dream, but only to pass over in his mind the things that were uppermost in it: incidents on the road or in the court of the Azhar, points from lectures on tradition or on law. But these reminiscences were short-lived; for when his brother deposited him in his corner it was not with the intention of leaving him to dream or to go over his lessons, but simply of giving himself time to get the food ready for lunch.

This meal varied from day to day, not so much in its menu, which consisted always of beans cooked in butter or oil, as by the atmosphere in which it was eaten. For one day it was silent and another day clamorously noisy. When the boy was alone with his brother they lunched in oppressive gloom almost without exchanging a word; they spoke in short sentences and the boy replied to his brother in monosyllables. But what a hullabaloo when the young sheikh's friends were invited! There were sometimes three and sometimes four, even occasionally five; but the fifth was important for a different reason, and it is better not to mention him now.

These young students came to spend a pleasant hour together; they completely neglected the boy, and addressed never a word to him, so that he had no need to make any reply.

He preferred it so, for he loved listening. And what a host of things there were to listen to and wonder at! Nothing could be more varied than the conversations which took place over that low circular table. The guests sat all round it on the floor; in the centre of it was placed a huge dish full of beans cooked in butter or oil, and beside it a great bowl full of mixed pickles soaked in water. The young men took a drink from this bowl before beginning to eat; one of them drank first and then passed the bowl on to his neighbour, but it was



never offered to the boy. When they had each taken their share of this tart *apéritif*, they started eating. The table was piled high with loaves, some of which were bought and paid for, others drawn as an allowance from the Azhar. The meal was nothing less than a competition to see which of them could eat the most, who could consume the largest quantity of loaves, gulp down the greatest number of mouthfuls, swallow the most considerable amount of beans in sauce, or devour the largest share of the turnips, peppers and cucumbers which were intended to help all this down. The din of eager laughing voices flooded through the room, burst out through the window on the left and dropped echoing into the street below; it overflowed through the door on the right and cascaded into the well of the building, where it interrupted the bickerings or whispered undertones of the workers' wives on the first floor. The women stopped to listen to the hubbub of talk and laughter wafted to them by the wind, as if they found a pleasure in it only paralleled by the delight which the young men took in swallowing their food.

The boy sat silently amongst them with his back bent like a bow. His hand travelled in a hesitant, apologetic way between the loaf laid on the table in front of him and the bowl which stood some distance away in the middle of the table. It kept colliding with a criss-cross of other hands, which moved so rapidly up and down that in a short time they had completely scoured the bowl. This aroused in the boy an astonishment mingled with disgust. He could not admit the compatibility of this passion for beans and pickles with the noble thirst for knowledge, the vivacity and penetration of mind which he recognised in these young men.

They did not let their lunch occupy any great length of time. Not a quarter of an hour passed before the bowl was empty and the table clean, apart from an odd crumb or two and half of the loaf which had been put in front of the boy. He had been unable, or unwilling, to eat more than half of it. In another moment the table had been lifted up by one of them, taken outside the room and cleared of the remains, to be brought back to its place clean and smooth except for the spots of butter and sauce which had been dropped on it. Another went to fetch some wood-charcoal and prepare the

samovar—that species of tea-kettle which the Persians and Russians use. He filled it up with water, then after lighting the fire and arranging the coals round it he put it back in the place where the bowl had been, with the tea-glasses on the edge of the table in front. Then he sat down again and waited for the water to boil. Whereupon the young men resumed their conversation, but this time in a quiet, languorous tone. For their energies were occupied at the moment in digesting the mixture of hot and cold, solid and liquid, which they had just put inside them. Then suddenly the voices dropped again and were quiet. The room was possessed by a solemn stillness, broken only by a thin, feeble vibration, intermittent at first, but soon becoming continuous.

The young men were enthralled. They broke the silence all together with a single word pronounced quietly, but in a firm, sustained tone: “Allaah!” Their voices lingered over the word as if they had been stirred to ecstasy by soft music heard a long way off. There was nothing strange in this; for what they were listening to was the wheeze of the water beginning to shift uneasily above the place where, without either noise or smoke, the charcoal was burning away. The student responsible for the tea watched intently over the samovar, concentrating eye and ear and mind upon it, until when the wheezing of the water changed to a bubbling he took a china tea-pot and, putting it close to the samovar, turned the tap carefully so that a little of the boiling water ran out into the tea-pot. Then he closed the tap again and cut off the flow of water. After this he replaced the lid of the tea-pot and shook it gently to and fro so that the little hot water that was in it could warm every part of the pot. As soon as it was warm he got up and poured this water away. For the tea must never come into contact either with cold glass or cold metal, which spoil its taste. After waiting for a few seconds he poured the water gently into the pot, without filling it to the brim. Then he picked up the tin of Indian tea, took a pinch of it and dropped it into the pot, which he then filled up to the brim before picking it up very carefully and putting it on to the embers for a few seconds. Finally he raised it in triumph and invited his friends to hold out their glasses.

Throughout this process the others waited in silence, watching jealously every movement their friend made, in case he should infringe any of the regulations. When the glasses were full, the teaspoons began to circle in them with a gay tinkle of metal against glass that fell like music upon the ear. Then the company raised their glasses to their mouths and began to suck the tea in with their lips in long sips, making an unpleasant sound which drowned the noise of the spoons playing in the glasses. They continued drinking with scarcely a word, except for this invariable remark, which had to be made by one of them and assented to by the rest: "So much to quench the fire in the beans!" When they had finished the first round the glasses were filled a second time, after fresh water had been poured into the pot to replace what had been drawn off. But this time the company was taking more interest in the tea than in the unhappy water which, as it absorbed the heat of the fire, first moaned, then sang plaintively, then burst into weeping as it boiled. But the young men paid no attention to it, unmoved either by its music or its tears. They were intent on the tea, and on this second round especially. The first round was intended to quench "the fire in the beans." But as for the second, that was destined simply for their own delight and the satisfaction of their bodies as a whole. It gave refreshment not only to their mouths and throats but to their heads too; at all events when they had finished this round they recovered their wits and became intelligent again. Their tongues were loosened, their lips began to smile, their voices were once more raised in conversation. But now it was not food and drink they were discussing. They were no longer preoccupied with physical needs and could turn their attention to things of the mind. They remembered what one sheikh had said in the first lecture, or another in the second, and found something to laugh at in each. They recalled an objection one of them had made to the sheikh, and discussed it amongst themselves. One would consider it so strong as to be conclusive, while another thought it unconvincing and even nonsensical. One of them would take the place of the sheikh in question, and another that of the student who had made the objection, while a third set up as judge of the debate. The judge would

interfere from time to time to bring one of the speakers back to the point or to support one of them with a forgotten argument or a proof left out. The student responsible for the tea was not debarred from the discussion, but on no account must he let his mind wander too far. He had added more tea and water to what was left in the pot, and the glasses had been drained and refilled. The tea ran at least to a third round; there were normally three glasses, but while the number might not be decreased, there was no objection to raising it.

The boy was still crouching in his corner, back bent and eyes lowered. His tea was passed to him in silence, and in silence he drank it. He paid attention to what went on and listened to what was said around him, understanding some of it, though missing more. But everything he heard, whether understood or not, enthralled him; and he asked himself yearningly how soon he would be able to talk and argue as these young men did.

Nearly an hour had gone by. Everyone had drunk his tea, but the table remained as it was, with the samovar in the middle and the glasses dotted round the edges. Noon was approaching, and the company would have to break up so that each of them might quickly look over the midday lesson before going in to hear it. They had prepared it together the night before, but there was no harm in a rapid revision to reconsider any word which was at all obscure or ambiguous. No doubt the text was clear and the commentary lucid. But El-Bannân¹ complicates the simple and ties knots where all seems plain. El-Sayyid Jurjâny's² penetrating mind draws dark secrets out of clarity itself; while 'Abdul-Hakîm³ is often clear enough, but even he creates unnecessary difficulties. As for the commentator, he's an imbecile who has no idea what he means. Now there are only a few minutes left before noon, so we must hurry to the Azhar, where the muezzins will be giving the call to prayer. The service will have begun while we are still on the way there. When we reach the Azhar it

¹ A modern writer on rhetoric.

² A fourteenth-century Arabic philosopher of Persia. To be distinguished from his more famous namesake the rhetorician 'Abdul-Qâhir Jurjâny (v. p. 24).

³ Author of treatises on theology who lived at the court of the Mongol rulers of India in the first half of the seventeenth century.

will already be over, and the students will have started forming circles round their sheikhs. No matter. We have missed the common prayer, so we will say it together after the lecture and still be praying in company. It is better not to say prayers before the lesson, when one's mind is distracted by the difficulties and problems in it requiring to be solved. When the lesson is over, when we have listened to it and discussed it, and delivered ourselves of its intricacies and puzzles, we shall be able to devote our whole hearts and minds to prayer.

The boy's brother was calling him, in a phrase which, throughout those years, he never ceased to use: "Now, sir, up with you!" So up the boy got, still rather dazed, and stumbled along at his brother's side till they reached the Azhar. His guide put him in his place for the grammar class and went off to Sheikh Sâlihy's lecture in the Chapel of the Blind.

The boy listened to the grammar lesson and understood it without effort. He found the sheikh's explanations and repetitions tedious in the extreme. When the lesson was over and the students had dispersed the boy remained in his place. Sooner or later his brother would come to drag him away all ungently without a word, out of the Azhar and along the road they had taken at dawn and in the middle of the morning, then deposit him in his place in the corner of the room, where the old carpet was stretched out on a rotten worn-out mat. From that moment the boy set himself to face the hours of agony.

V

WHAT tortured the boy was solitude; blank, unending solitude. He stayed still in his corner from before the middle of the afternoon, at which time his brother left him and went off to one of his friends' rooms elsewhere in the building. The meeting-place was never fixed; it might be one room in the morning, another in the afternoon and a third in the evening.

After the midday lecture, then, his brother went off and left him alone for a period which varied from day to day. The group spent the time in a leisurely fashion, joking and telling stories about their teachers or other students. Their voices rose, and their laughter echoed through the building until it reached the boy frozen in his corner; a smile might flitter across his lips, but in his heart there was only pain, because he could not hear what they were saying. In the morning he had at least been able to listen to their anecdotes and sallies of wit, and to add his ghost of a smile to their boisterous outbursts of laughter.

The boy knew very well what followed. Soon they would have had enough of this relaxation and be tired of telling stories at the expense of their teachers and fellow-students; then they would gather round afternoon tea in quiet, orderly conversation, before going over any points that had cropped up in the midday lecture; then they would prepare for the evening lecture, which was to be given by the Imam, Sheikh Muhammad 'Abdu,¹ sometimes on the *Dalâ'il el-I'gâz*² and on other days on the Koran. During their preparation for this lecture they would talk about the Imam himself, discussing his extraordinary qualities, recalling his judgments on the sheikhs, or theirs on him, and repeating the crushing replies with which he used to silence questioners or objectors and make them a laughing-stock to their fellows. The boy yearned with all his heart to be with them and to listen to what they

¹ See introduction.

² Lit. *Proofs of the Miracle*, i.e. book of the proofs that the Koran is a miracle, by 'Abdul-Qâhir Jurjâny, prince of Arabic rhetoricians (eleventh century); to be distinguished from El-Sayyid Jurjâny, mentioned on p. 22.

said. It may be too that deep inside himself he felt a longing for one of the cups of tea that were being passed round there; he was not different from them in desiring, at the proper times, morning and evening, his share of tea. But all was denied him. The others went on joking and arguing and studying and drinking tea only a few paces away. But he could take no part in this, nor could he ask his brother for permission to join the company and share these pleasures of body and of mind.

He could not bring himself to make such a request; for the last thing he could bear to do was to ask anyone for anything. If he had spoken to his brother about it, no matter whether the reply had been harsh or gentle, it would have tortured him just the same. So the best thing was to control himself, to say nothing of his passion for learning, his need for conversation or his craving for tea. He must withdraw altogether and go on crouching there silently in his corner, absorbed in his own thoughts. But how could he do this when his brother had left the door wide open, so that he heard first of all the sound of their voices and laughter, then later on a minute or two's silence, which told him that the master of ceremonies was breaking the charcoal to light the fire for tea. All these sounds stirred in him desire and dread, hope and despair; enough to unnerve him and reduce him to utter misery. It was all the worse in that he could not even budge from his place, or take the few short steps which would bring him to the door of the room, so as to be nearer to the voices and have more chance of catching a few words here and there. This would have been a great consolation to him. But alas, he could not move from his place; not because he did not know the way to the door—he had learnt that long ago, and a few short, careful paces would have brought him there—but because he was ashamed to be surprised by some passer-by as he stole along with cautious, furtive steps. He was especially anxious not to be caught by his brother, who used to visit the room now and again to fetch a book, perhaps, or some food or other to eat with tea at odd times of the day. Anything in the world was better than to be met by his brother as he fumbled nervously along, and to be asked: "What do you want? Where are you going?" So he saw that

by far the best thing was to stay where he was, and to stamp down these yearnings that welled up inside him, together with others no less bitter and insistent for that house far away in the country village which was his home.

There, when he returned from school, worn out with play, he would make a meal off a crust of dry bread, while he joked with his sisters or described to his mother some amusing incident that had occurred that day at school. When he was tired of this he could go out of the house, bolting the door behind him, and walk on till he reached the wall of the house opposite; he turned southwards alongside this until he reached a spot where he bore right, and arrived after a time at a shop belonging to Sheikh Muhammad 'Abdul-Wâhid and his younger brother El-Hagg Mahmûd. Here he sat talking and telling stories and listening to the sheikh's customers, both male and female, whose simple country conversation delighted him not only by its variety and strangeness, but by its very simplicity.

Sometimes there were not many customers. Then one of the owners of the shop, having nothing to do, would start a discussion with the boy, or read to him from a book. Sometimes, instead of visiting the shop, the boy would go outside the house and sit cross-kneed on the bench against the wall, listening in silence to the conversations his father used to hold there with his friends from the time of afternoon prayer until the muezzin called them away to evensong and to their suppers.

Sometimes, instead of going out, the boy would stay indoors with a school-friend who had come to see him, bringing a book of exhortation or some tale of the conquests of Islam. Then his friend would read to him until sunset called him home to supper. So the boy never felt lonely, never knew the torture of inactivity, hunger or exclusion, never yearned in vain for a cup of tea.

All these memories kept crowding in on the boy's brain as he lay there in utter immobility. His dreams were cut short for a moment by the call of the muezzin to afternoon prayer from the Mosque of Baibars.¹ The man's voice was

¹ Baibars II El-Gâshenkir (1247-1325) was a Mameluke slave who won his freedom and was for two years Sultan of Egypt. His *khanqa* or convent mosque in Sharia El-Gamaliya is one of the finest in Cairo.

utterly hateful to the boy; it contrasted so harshly with the voice of the muezzin in his village at home, which was more melodious than any he had ever heard. How many times had this man amused and entertained the boy, and in what a variety of ways! How often had he taken him up the minaret and let him give the call to prayer in his place, or accompany him in the invocation which followed it! But here in this room the boy loathed hearing the call to prayer, for he could not join in it and did not even know where it came from. He had never once been in the Mosque of Baibars and did not know the way to the minaret. He had never set foot on its steps, and had no idea whether the staircase was straight and broad or as narrow and twisty as the steps in the minaret at home.

Of all this he knew nothing, and there was no way of learning it, only this waiting, this eternal immobility. Ah, what agonies one can be condemned to by a passion for learning!

This interminable blankness was nothing if not exhausting. Drowsiness would come upon him as he crouched on his mat, and often he would be forced to lie down and surrender himself to sleep. His mother used to tell him that to sleep in the afternoon was extremely harmful both to body and mind. But what could he do? How could he shake off this pernicious slumber?

He woke with a start, hearing a voice call him in words that rang in his ears year after year: "Sir, are you asleep?" It was his brother come to see how he was getting on and to bring him his supper. This was a pleasant meal consisting of a loaf of bread and a piece of Greek cheese or a slice of sesame cake. Every weekday, after putting this meal in front of him, his brother would say good night and go off to attend the Imam's lecture at the Azhar.

The boy attacked his food with more or less appetite, but in either case he left nothing uneaten. He used often to eat very little when he was with his brother, who made no comment or remark on the subject. But when he ate alone he used to finish everything, even if he had to force his appetite. He was afraid that his brother, when he came back, would see that he had left some of his food and imagine he was ill

or unhappy. And the last thing he could bear was to give his brother pain or anxiety.

So he set to and ate everything. When it was finished he went back again to his own corner and surrendered himself to listless inactivity. As the day began to decline and the sun descended towards the west, a slow, haggard melancholy came down upon the boy. The muezzin sang out his call to evening prayer and told him that the day was done. He felt the shadows closing in upon him and knew that if anyone else had been with him in the room he would have lit the lamp and driven them away. But he was alone, and as far as folk with eyes could tell he had no need of any lamp. The boy knew only too well that they were mistaken. For in those days he drew a sharp distinction between darkness and light. If the lamp was lit he found it friendly and companionable, whereas darkness was sheer desolation. Perhaps it was only the fruit of youthful imagination and a nervous temperament: but the strange thing was that he sensed the darkness with his ears as a constant tingling sound like the hum of a mosquito, only louder and coarser. Its impact stung his ears and put terror into his heart. He felt compelled to change his posture; rising to a sitting position he supported his elbows on his knees, hid his head in his hands and abandoned himself to that inescapable buzz. If in the afternoon solitude forced him asleep, in the evening it stirred him into a wakefulness worse than a nightmare.

He might in the end have become accustomed to the sound of darkness and even found it reassuring; but there were various other sounds in the room which combined to madden him. The house belonged to the Wakfs,¹ which is as much as to say that its origin was lost in the vast backwardness of time; its walls were rotten with age and full of cracks containing hordes of insects and other small animals. These creatures seemed to have made it their business, after nightfall, to keep watch and ward over the boy as he lay crouching in his corner. There were inconsiderable scratchings, light movements this way and that, now furtive, now hasty—enough to make the boy shiver with fear. When his brother came in, whether alone or with friends, and the lamp was lit,

¹ Religious endowments administered by the Ministry of Wakfs.

all these sounds and shiftings ceased as though they had never been. This was the main reason why the boy never dared to mention them to anyone. The least of his fears was that, if he said anything about the matter, people might call him an idiot or cast doubts upon his courage or intelligence. So he preferred to keep quiet and master his apprehensions as best he could.

There was the muezzin calling to the last prayer of the day. A gleam of hope stirred in him for a moment, then betrayed him to blank despair. The Imam's lecture was over and the boy's brother would soon be coming in to light the lamp, put away his portfolio and take anything he needed in the way of books, food and so on, diffusing through the room as he did so a little comfort and peace and ridding it for a time of that intolerable solitude. But then he would throw the boy his bedclothes, stay long enough to see him roll himself up in the rug and lay his head on the pillow, then put out the lamp and go off, shutting the door behind him and turning the key in the lock. He must have imagined, as he walked away, that he had left the boy sound asleep, when in fact he had abandoned him to a long-drawn-out nightmare of insomnia.

In three or four hours' time he would come back, after he had eaten his dinner and drunk his tea, talked of this and that with his friends and worked with them on the next day's lessons. He would turn the key in the lock and light up the lamp, imagining all the time that the boy was sunk in a sweet, peaceful slumber, when in fact he had never tasted sleep and had only been waiting in frightened impatience for his brother to return.

The young man put out the light and lay down on his bed. Soon the sound of his breathing, now disturbed and now more regular, showed that he had fallen asleep. Then at last there flooded through the boy a blissful sense of release; his spirit was filled with confidence and his mind wrapped up in the serenest quiet.

And then, without any perceptible transition, he slid out of consciousness into a downy sleep.

VI

SUDDENLY two strange sounds woke him with a start: a heavy stick beating violently on the floor and a tremulous human voice which continued praising and glorifying God in agitated tones for several minutes together. Nothing could be more unexpected, in the all-embracing peace of the night, than this shaky voice echoing out again and again between blow upon blow of the stick. Its first notes were loud enough to send a shiver of unrest through the night; then it came nearer and nearer till it almost reached the boy's room, before turning away and fading little by little until it could scarcely be heard. Again it rang out, loud and sustained, as the man reached the bottom of the staircase and picked his way along the alley; then it became gradually more distant, until it ceased altogether.

This sound, or rather combination of sounds, scared the boy stiff the first time he heard it. He racked his brains in the effort to guess what it was and where it came from, but in vain. The only result was that he lost all power to sleep and spent the rest of the night in agitated reflection; he was only restored to calm and confidence by the voice of the muezzin crying "Prayer is better than sleep." The boy got up cheerfully, without fuss, but his brother was in a tearing hurry. It was only a matter of minutes before they were down the staircase and well on the way to the Azhar, where one of them was due at a lecture on first principles and the other at one on tradition.

This double sound woke the boy well before dawn every morning. It scared him and mystified him too. But he dare not ask his brother or anyone else for an explanation. Then came Friday. He was woken up by the same nerve-racking sounds, and calmed again as ever by the muezzin's call to prayer. But that was all; there was no getting up yet for either of them, no furious bustle from the young man, no movement, however quiet, from the boy. For

on Friday morning there were no lectures to cut short their sleep.

Unfortunately the boy's sleep had been broken long ago by that mysterious voice and knocking. But his brother, as always, slept through them both. So the boy had to stay in bed, vexed by inactivity but anxious not to make any movement which might disturb his brother. Then came dawn and early-morning prayer; the sun rose, and its beams pierced languorously into the room. But hark! There were those two sounds again, much softer and quieter this time; the stick was gently tapping the ground, and the voice seemed to caress the atmosphere with a sweet, almost languid whisper. The boy was astonished; why should these sounds be so harsh and violent in the dead of night when people were asleep and restraint was called for, but quiet and gentle after daybreak when everyone was up and there could be no objection to raising one's voice and making what noise one liked? Meanwhile, the boy was obliged to stay still, avoiding any movement which might wake his brother. Eventually the warm sunlight beat so strongly on his forehead that he had to sit up and shift lazily across until he was out of its reach, before settling down again to sleep. He absolutely refused to get up, and the boy became more and more annoyed and disgusted with him. Then came a sharp knock on the door and a voice shouting furiously on the other side: "Get up, lads; get up, you wastrels! How long are you going on sleeping? God help us, what sinners you are! You call yourselves students, do you, and sleep till nearly noon, without saying your prayers at the appointed time. Get up, you sinners, get up!"

As the owner of the voice knocked on the door and belaboured the ground with his stick, a chorus of laughter broke out around him. The young sheikh had awoken at the first alarm but stayed where he was, quietly chuckling to himself; he was obviously amused by this extraordinary tirade and wanted it to continue as long as possible. The boy recognised both the voice and the stick; they were the same that disturbed him every morning before dawn and robbed him of all further sleep. But who could this man be, and what sort of a stick was it? Why this chorus of mirth? The young man got up with a shout of laughter and opened the door; in

came the culprit, shouting "God help us! You sinners, you infidels! God save us from your sins and arm us against the wiles of the Devil! Are you men or beasts? Are you Moslems or infidels? Haven't your sheikhs taught you the difference between virtue and vice?"

At the same time the young man's friends burst into the room, overcome with laughter. Then at last our friend recognised the man as Uncle Hagg 'Aly.

Uncle Hagg 'Aly was an old man of seventy who had lost none of his vigour either of mind or body. He was sharp, dexterous and witty; square-shouldered, agile, strongly built; violent if he was stirred, and in his speech as strident as could be. He was incapable of lowering his voice, and had no conception of such a thing as a whisper; he invariably shouted. In his former life—as the boy discovered later on—Uncle Hagg 'Aly had been a merchant; he had been born and bred in Alexandria and had kept all the vehemence of character and all the charming frankness for which Alexandrians are famous. He had traded in rice, whence his full name Uncle Hagg 'Aly El-Razzâz. When he grew old he abandoned commerce, or rather commerce abandoned him; and having a house in Cairo which brought him a little money he took a room there, though except for the two Persians before mentioned the only other occupants were Azharites.

Uncle Hagg 'Aly's room was at the far end of the building, on your left as you came up the stairs; he was often to be found there in the middle of a hilarious crowd of his student friends. For there had grown up between him and them a really cordial and lasting attachment, founded on genuine affection.

The old man was well aware of their thirst for knowledge and their horror of frivolity and idleness; this was what he loved and admired so much in them. So during the week he avoided going to see them, and they kept away from him; it was almost as if he did not know them, except that on occasion they would go specially to see him or invite him to share their lunch or tea. But when Friday came they were practically inseparable. He would wait until it was high day, when he knew that they had had all the rest and sleep they needed; then he would come into the passage, and beginning

with the nearest of the young men's rooms he would wake up its occupant in the uproarious fashion described, then proceed to the next, and so on until he came to the last room, which belonged to our friend's brother. Round him was a riot of happy young men, greeting their day of rest with a laugh, and smiling upon life as life smiled upon them.

On Fridays it was the old man who looked after their food and made himself responsible for their venial pleasures. He it was who fixed the menu for their lunch and then prepared it for them, either in his own room or in one of theirs. The supper was his choice too; he advised them what to cook for it, then supervised the cooking, and stood by to put anything right which might go wrong. He spent the morning with them, then went off for midday prayer, and did not leave them again until it was time for afternoon prayer; then he came back to share their supper and the tea which followed. At sunset he led them in their prayers, and finally after dark he went off to the last prayer of the day and left them to the preparation of their lessons for the next morning.

Uncle Hagg 'Aly's piety was impeccable; in fact he was as ostentatiously religious as it is possible to be. He began with the expedition repeated every morning hours before dawn, when he came out of his room praising the Lord in no uncertain tones and beating his stick on the ground all the way to the Mosque of Sayyidna Hussein. There he read a litany for daybreak and joined in the dawn service. He came back muttering and murmuring his prayers and playing a tattoo on the ground with his stick; then he rested for a while in his room. He performed the other prayers at the appropriate times in his own room, reciting the Koran or exalting Allah in a loud voice with the door wide open, so that everyone in the building should hear. But when he was amongst his young friends, eating a meal with them, drinking tea or passing the evening in their company, none was so quick-witted, so amusing, so talkative, so exuberant as he, and none so indulgent to the vices of humanity. His capacity for scandal-mongering was astonishing, and his tongue knew no restraint or limit; he would reel off at the top of his voice a succession of the filthiest phrases in the language; no word could be too

ugly for him, no expression too suggestive, no image too overwhelming. He revelled in them all.

In spite of this, the young men loved him; or maybe it was precisely for this reason. They were passionately attached to him, no doubt because he could vary for them the work-a-day monotony of their lives, the daily round of study, and open a door for them into a world of gaiety and pleasure which they could never have entered alone, and which in fact they did no more than glance into as they thronged around him, listening for hours on end to the stream of depravity which he poured into their ears. They listened to it all, and laughed till their sides ached, but, despite this, they never answered the old man back with a single one of his foul words or indecent expressions. It was as if they had been spectators of some thrilling entertainment which they had enjoyed from a distance without allowing themselves to injure their susceptibilities by going closer or joining in.

All this revealed most clearly a remarkable quality these students possessed, and for which they deserved both admiration and pity; they were distinguished from their comrades and contemporaries by a self-control and mastery of their appetites which enabled them to concentrate on their studies and saved them from sinking, as most of their fellows did, into that abyss of easy pleasures which relax the will, undermine vitality and destroy character. The boy listened to all this, understanding and recording everything; but he could not help wondering how a devotion to learning, with all the effort it implied, was to be reconciled with this unbridled passion for buffoonery. He promised himself that when he grew up and reached the same stage as these students for whose intelligence he had so much admiration he would never follow their example and waste his time on such frivolities as they did.

Friday, then, for these students, as for their friend, was devoted largely to eating. In the morning they gathered noisily round a savoury meal composed of beans and eggs, followed by tea and home-made biscuits. These were dry crackers, which their mothers in the simplicity of their hearts had lavished upon them, and into whose preparation they had put so much loving-kindness and care. The boy could

never forget what efforts it had cost his father to scrape together enough money for his mother to make them with; the trouble she took over the work; her satisfaction as she got them ready; her unspoken misery as she packed them up; then the floods of tears with which she surrendered them to whoever was taking them to the station. How often the boy remembered all this as the young men devoured their biscuits! Sometimes they would imitate Uncle Hagg 'Aly and dip them in their teacups before swallowing; and sometimes they crunched them loudly between their teeth before sipping a mouthful of tea and soaking them against their palate, until they would slip gently down the throat home. All this while they were laughing at the old man's buffooneries, without giving a thought to their father and his exertions, or their mother and her weary tears.

The old man and his young friends used to make up the menu for supper directly after lunch, during the second and third rounds of tea. This scene used to demoralise the boy and fill him with acute embarrassment; but later on the memory of it filled him with sympathy and admiration. The consultations and deliberations were endless, but their range was extremely limited. The choice lay between two sorts of food, and two only: either potato stew, with meat, onions and tomatoes; or marrow stew, with onions, tomatoes and meat, and perhaps a few chick-peas into the bargain. They agreed upon the quantities to be bought of each ingredient and fixed the cost; then each produced his share of the total, except the old man, who was exempted from this obligation. When the necessary funds were collected one of them went off to buy the food. On his return another set to work on the fire, which he kindled with wood-charcoal. As soon as the embers were properly arranged he began to prepare the food, while his companions looked on, singly or in groups, and the old man proffered good advice. When all the food required was ready the cook arranged the fire so as to make the brew simmer as gently as possible. The others either gathered in a merry circle round the old man or went elsewhere to work; the cook would snatch himself away from time to time to cast a glance at the food in case it should burn or spoil and to add an occasional drop or two of water.

All the time the food was cooking the most appetising odours tickled everyone's nostrils and gave them a foretaste of the coming meal. To be sure they were not the only ones in the house preparing such food, for there were other groups of students cooking the same things and sniffing the same smells. But there were certainly some of their comrades who had not the slightest chance of cooking themselves food like this; not to mention the workers living on the lower floor of the building, who could never dream of offering anything of the kind to their wives and children. They probably had to put up with the bitterest of reproaches from their wives on account of this deprivation. All those who were denied such luxury, whether labourers or students, must have found the smell which filled the house on Fridays a very mixed pleasure. The charcoal burnt with a gradualness and deliberation calculated to prolong the pleasure of our friends and the anguish of the others. It was not until afternoon prayer was over and the sun drawing towards the west that the food was at last cooked. The company gathered round the table with an alacrity which was half serious and half burlesque. Everyone made sure of getting his full share of the food and took care that none of his friends should cheat, while at the same time concealing this furtive espionage as best he could. However, the old man was there; and his frank good humour put their covert glances to shame. He kept his eye on them all and made a just division of the food. He pulled up anyone who wanted more than his fair share, without hesitation or concealment, simply by remarking in his usual bellow that so-and-so was making a mistake and taking a piece of meat large enough for a potato ration, and that somebody else was giving too generous a helping either to himself or to one of his friends. These accusations were rolled out with such a good-humoured air that no one's feelings could be hurt and everyone was compelled to laugh out of sheer amusement.

Amid this storm of merriment the boy felt nervous and embarrassed; his hand moved so awkwardly over the table that he could neither cut himself a helping nor take a spoonful out of the dish nor raise the food to his mouth without making some mistake. He imagined that the eyes of the whole company were upon him and that the old man especi-

ally was stealing glances at him all the time. He became more nervous than ever; and then of course his hand began to tremble, and the gravy dripped onto his clothes. He was only too painfully aware of this, but could do nothing to stop it. It is probable, and in fact certain, that the others had been far too occupied with their own affairs to notice him. The clearest proof of this is that they now began to pay attention to him, pressing him to eat, and offering him things which were outside his reach. But this only increased his confusion. So these merry feasts, which might have been a great source of enjoyment, only brought him pain and regret. But no: even this anguish could be a source of pleasure and amusement when the others had gone off, after tea, to work or chat together, and left him alone to recall their conversation. Sometimes he actually caught himself laughing.

These students passed many years in the old man's company; and thanks to Uncle Hagg 'Aly, despite all the miseries, regrets and disappointments which chequered his path, the boy grew up in an atmosphere of gaiety and laughter.

Then the little group scattered. Each of those young men went his own way, and left the building to settle in some distant quarter of the town. Their visits to the old man grew rarer, then stopped altogether. They appeared to have forgotten him, and then actually did so.

Then one day the news came to a few of them that the old man was dead. They were sorry, to be sure, but they scarcely showed it; their grief left no traces on their cheeks or in their eyes. The one who had brought the news had been at his deathbed, and reported that the old man's last words had been a prayer for the boy's brother. God rest the soul of Uncle Hagg 'Aly, whom in the early days the boy utterly detested, but whose memory in later years never failed to stir him profoundly.

VII

THE old man was not the only person upon whom they could rely for pleasure and recreation. They were also entertained for short periods and as it were indirectly by the occupant of the room at the far end of the building on the right, corresponding to the old man's room at the left-hand end. He was a middle-aged man, certainly past forty, but not yet fifty. He had spent more than twenty years as a student at the Azhar, without qualifying for his degree, though he did not despair of getting it one day. Not that he made it his only aim in life or concentrated exclusively upon it. In fact it was only one of a number of interests.

He had a wife and children to whom he devoted his summer vacation, the Ramadan¹ holiday, and the other short breaks which occur from time to time in the university year. His family was settled in a village close to Cairo, and the journey there and back to visit them cost him little either in time or money. Like many people in this district he owned a short strip or two of land, and had married the daughter of a man of similar condition; so he was by no means a pauper, as the phrase went in those days, nor yet indeed a rich man. Above all, he was thrifty almost to the point of avarice.

His interest in learning was moderate, and his industry no more than mediocre; his attendance at lectures was distinctly poor and his intellectual capacity nil. Yet he regarded himself as an intelligent man, and even as a victim. Not that the examiners had treated him unfairly; he had spent more than twenty years at the Azhar without ever presenting himself for the examination, which he could have taken after twelve years. The fact is that he was a thorough cynic about the Azhar, and saw it all askew.

He had a poor opinion of the students. He believed, rightly

¹ The month of fasting, during which Moslems neither eat nor drink nor smoke between sunrise and sunset. It comes ten days or so earlier each year than the last, reckoning by the Gregorian calendar, and is followed by the festival of the Lesser Bairam.

or wrongly—wrongly, in all probability—that degrees at the Azhar were not won by intelligence or merit, by hard work or genuine attainments, but by a combination of pure luck and cleverness in currying favour with the examiners. He saw himself as the victim of fortune, which for some unknown reason had let him down. As he was doomed to disappointment if he went in for the examination, it was better not to try at all.

He started the year at the Azhar with the firm intention of preparing for the examination, and made arrangements to read through the prescribed books with a group of friends. But not more than a month or two would pass before he sensed that luck was against him; he lost all enthusiasm and energy for study, and turned to one of his other interests. He persuaded himself that fortune had failed him once again in denying him what she had given to so many of his friends; for they happened to have the kind of social standing or astuteness of mind which impress the sheikhs. So, although he was really no less intelligent than they, and no less capable of serious effort, they would succeed and he would not.

In conversation with his fellow-students he used to declare that he knew an infallible method of winning the degree, and would probably have been tempted to use it were it not that he had a rooted objection to selling even a perch or two of land for the purpose, though his degree, if he secured it, would bring him not only the title of Doctor but an extra allowance of bread and a sum of seventy-five piastres at the end of every month.

So he went on waiting for sunnier days, when fate would smile upon him as it had on a friend and fellow-villager of his the year before. This friend had remained a student for a quarter of a century, though he had a quick and penetrating mind. Then one fine day he had presented himself for the examination. Not only did he pass, but they actually put him in the second of the three classes, and if he had been on better terms with one of the members of the commission he would have been in the first.

So it was best to wait, as his friend had waited; then perhaps luck would favour him in the same way. "My friends," he said, "it's all a question of luck. I've studied as you have,

worked as you have. And yet—I wish you better luck than mine. I've no hope, and no ambition either."

Those young men listened intently to all this, fixing in their memories not only what he said but the curious way in which he said it. For he spoke in a strangely quiet voice, more like a whisper than anything else, emphasising the syllables as if he wanted to stamp them on his audience's ears. He interspersed his remarks with a series of jokes and witticisms which seemed to him killingly funny; so much so that he laughed long and heartily himself. The others at first found nothing to laugh at; but he, nothing daunted, went on and on till he rocked his sides with laughter, and in the end they were forced to do so too. He had an extraordinarily laughable laugh, so to speak. It started as a shrill whoop, stopped, then rippled on for a moment under the breath, before breaking out once more on the high note and beginning all over again.

Often when they had nothing better to do the students would entertain themselves for an hour or so by repeating this fellow's buffooneries and mimicking his extraordinary laugh.

But what impressed them most in him was something quite different. He was a sensualist, a man passionately addicted to pleasure. He loved talking about his orgies and derived as much if not more enjoyment from a detailed description of them than he did from the experiences themselves. The pleasures he thought and talked about so much might be considered vicious or venial according to the way you looked at them. He used to describe his intimate relations with his wife, with a wealth of unpleasant details, which he punctured from time to time with that incredible laugh. Or he would recall the delights of the rich greasy food he ate in the country, or the coarser food of the town, interjecting here and there one of his facetious jokes or a burst of his jerky yet rippling laughter.

Then he would wax enthusiastic over the sights he had seen as he walked along the streets and alleys of the town or stayed at home to take the air and watch what happened on the lower floor of the block. He never met a woman, either indoors or out of doors, without running his eyes all over her,

in fact mentally stripping her naked. This unwholesome practice aroused no sense of guilt in him whatever. He never spoke of a woman as such or applied to her any of the words people normally use; he would say for instance "There's a fine pair of haunches." A slim woman had no interest for him; to be worth the name, he maintained, a woman must be plump and sizeable, with limbs amply covered in flesh. Like a down cushion, he would say, or a mattress.

In support of his predilection he used to quote Ka'b Ibn Zohair's lines¹ about his mistress Su'ad:

*From in front she looks slender, but from behind, how superbly rounded!
She cannot be called too short, nor yet too tall.*

"Don't you see," he said to his companions, "that he only mentions the fact of her being slender from in front so that he can add how big she looks from behind." Then he would go off into a mass of unpleasant details, accompanied by a flow of dirty jokes and stories, and the alternate catch and release of that unprecedented laugh. The young men were quite overcome by all this. Such pleasures, guilty and innocent alike, were beyond their grasp; and nothing was calculated to make so deep an impression on them as these prurient descriptions.

The boy went on crouching miserably in his corner, almost as if he were not there at all; yet he heard everything. Not a word, not a tone of voice escaped him. If these people realised, he thought, how I listen to them and how much I learn from them, they would avoid discussing such things as these in front of a young boy.

In the years which this fellow spent in the tenement after the boy's arrival he was involved in an endless series of incidents, all of them superficially amusing but on deeper reflection pitiful in the extreme.

He was a fellah, with all the besetting sins of his kind: hunger for land, miserliness over money, an overweening anxiety to be the gainer in any and every transaction. When he visited his home village, or thought about the country, or

¹ Poet contemporary with Muhammad, who on his refusal to be converted to Islam outlawed him. Ka'b is said eventually to have made his peace with the Prophet by coming upon him unawares and reciting his celebrated poem *Bānat Su'ad* ("Su'ad has disappeared").

came across a member of his family, it was money and money alone that occupied his mind.

He was a sensualist in the fullest meaning of the term; hungry for sensation and eager in pursuit of those easy pleasures which depend neither on delicacy of mind nor on refinement of taste or feeling. His academic efforts and aspirations were no more than a means to an end, or rather one of many ends, since they served as a pleasant change when he was tired out with making money or sickened by the pursuit of pleasure. He would come back and settle down in his room at the far end of the block and bethink him of his fellow-students, his teachers and his degree. Then he would meet these young friends of his over the lunch table or a cup of tea, and regale them with his juicy tit-bits. Despite all this he was an ardent believer. He had strange fits of mysticism which from time to time jerked him out of the sensual round and made an ascetic of him; he took himself severely to task and settled down to a régime of fasting and mortification.

One day after quarrelling with his father-in-law over something or other he broke with his peasant wife and determined to marry into a more pretentious family in Cairo. So he divorced her, and began to confide in his friends about his new ambitions, explaining in the crudest terms exactly how townswomen were different from women of the country. Then one fine day he forgot all about money and women and gave up his orgies of eating and drinking. He had had a presentiment that if he took the examination luck would be with him. There could be no question about it; he would certainly get into training at once for the grim duel with the sheikhs. He had several months in which to prepare. Good-bye then to his old friends and companions, good-bye to chatter and frivolity. He must concentrate on law and rhetoric and grammar, on theology and first principles, in short on all the subjects which go to make up the syllabus. And concentrate he did; until at last one memorable day he went up for the examination.

He came before the examiners in the early morning, and left them in the evening as tired as he was himself. He had thought out a fantastic scheme for giving himself a rest when they pressed him too hard. He bought two or three water-

melons and left them near the examination room. On appearing before the examiners he explained that he was unwell and could not hold his water; so he begged permission to leave the room whenever his malady made it necessary. The examiners took pity on him and gave him every liberty. So he would start commenting on some text or answering a question from one of the examiners, but in the middle he would break off suddenly and ask to be excused. Off he went, not to relieve himself or to attend to any sort of disorder, but to swallow half a water-melon, which—as he put it himself—would cool his blood, sharpen his wits and generally freshen his ideas. Then he would reappear before the board and take up his exposition where he had left it. This went on almost all day long, without any objection from the examiners. At last he came home in an ecstasy of happiness. He had managed to secure a degree—if only a third-class one—and now he was one of the *'ulema*.

With the summer everyone scattered, and when his friends came across him again in the autumn he was living elsewhere. He had achieved his ambition of marrying into a Cairo family and settled down with his bride in a house not far from his old room.

One day his ascetic mood came back and he decided to go into retreat for a few days in a mosque and mortify his flesh with prayer and fasting. He carried out his plan, and lived in solitude, for how long exactly I don't know; but it must have been a considerable time, because when he came out he was as weak and emaciated as could be. When his family saw him they were revolted and probably made jokes about his virility. This was enough to bring out the peasant strain in him again, with all the passionate sensuality of his country blood. He took to going out in the early morning to some café or restaurant where he could make a pig of himself on a mixture of beans, bread, onions and oil, then staunch the resulting thirst with enough tea to soak him silly, and finally inflict on his poor stomach, bloated with all this mass of food and drink, things that people of his sort never name, but only hint at. Having digested all this, or rather failed to digest it, he would go back home in a raging fury to be met this time with looks of fear and disgust. Then he attempted to throw himself out

of the window, but was prevented by members of his family, who, after a hard struggle, overpowered him and tied him up. His reason had gone, and he was stark, staring mad.

Unforgettable was the cry which rang out one night after evening prayer and struck those young men dumb with horror; they would have burst into tears if they had not been ashamed to show their feelings. It was a cry from the mad-man, whose tongue had been loosened by the agony of delirium. Next morning his family took him to the asylum. He stayed several weeks there and came back changed out of all recognition. His voice was more of a whisper than ever, his movements were sluggish and his laugh non-existent. He aroused in those who met him a mixture of fear and pity.

The endless stream of days flowed on, and the young men lost touch with their former friend. Each one of them went his own way, and their visits to him grew rarer and rarer before ceasing altogether. Even news of him reached them very irregularly, until that too ceased. Then one day they heard that he was dead.

The news of his death saddened them for a moment, but it brought no tears to their eyes and scarcely darkened their faces with a frown. They could only repeat the pious phrase which never fails to spring to men's lips on such occasions as these:

“We belong to God, and to Him we must return.”

VIII

THERE was another room in the building which witnessed scenes of gaiety no less hilarious. It was near the top of the stairs on the left-hand side. Its occupant was a young man who may have been a little older than our friends, and was certainly senior to them at the Azhar, though he belonged to the same generation and class. He had a piping little voice which no one could help laughing at. His intelligence was so limited that no sort of information would stay fixed in his head and so dull that he could never penetrate an inch below the surface of anything he read. Nevertheless he was infatuated with himself and his ambition knew no bounds. He was quite honestly convinced that there was no difference whatever between himself and the friends with whom he lived and studied.

Not that he went to all the lectures they did. He showed up at those on law and rhetoric, and at the Imam's lecture, but did not bother about the lecture on first principles, for which he would have had to get up at dawn. To him sleep was something sacred, and he was chary of cutting it short. But he did not fail to join his friends in their private study, and especially in one kind of research which had no connection with the regular courses or the books read by the sheikhs.

These young men were extremely critical of the books and methods of teaching used at the Azhar. In this they followed the opinions of the Imam, who when they attended his lectures or visited him at his house used to give them the titles of valuable books on grammar, rhetoric, theology, and even literature. These books, despite their importance, were disdained by the sheikhs, because they had never read them; perhaps too their repugnance was increased by the very fact of the Imam's approval. However, some of the more competent sheikhs were eager to follow in the Imam's footsteps, and recommended important books which were not read at the Azhar, simply because they never had been. No sooner did

our friends catch the title of a book of this kind than they rushed off to buy it, if they had the means, often at the cost of serious privation and self-denial. Otherwise they would borrow the book from the Azhar library and after scanning it eagerly make arrangements to read it together and to help each other understand it. In doing this they were inspired by a sincere affection for the Imam and a genuine desire to widen their knowledge. But there were no doubt other motives connected with a sort of academic vanity. They were proud of being pupils of the Imam, Sheikh Bakhît, Sheikh Abu Khatwa, and Sheikh Râdy. They were never tired of talking of these sheikhs as their masters and priding themselves on being their favourite pupils. They were not content with a regular attendance at lectures, but used to visit these sheikhs at their homes. They would share in some piece of research or take private lessons with their teachers after noon or evening prayer on Thursdays. They were by no means put out if their fellow-students knew about all this or remarked upon the unusual books they were reading. In this way they came to be surrounded by an aura of distinction and acquired the reputation of being outstanding students who were assured of a brilliant future. Naturally enough their company was eagerly sought after by less gifted students who hoped to gain advantages from the connection. To be known as their friends and intimates was itself a mark of distinction. It was also a means of getting to know the leading sheikhs. Our friend was one of these second-raters who had attached himself to the group in the hope of being regarded as one of them and so being able to accompany them on their visits to the Imam and Sheikh Bakhît. It was no doubt the vanity of adolescence which led them to take advantage of their privileged position and to admit these parasites of learning to their company. But they never forgave them their stupidity. Once left to themselves they would remember all the stupid mistakes they had caught them making, and laugh till they almost split their sides. In all probability our friend had got to know them at some lecture or other and set himself to cultivate their company. He visited their lodgings, approved of the house and thought what a good idea it would be to live there too. So he took a room in the building and attached him-

self to the group. He attended lectures with them, drank tea in their company, took part in their visits and even enjoyed something of their reputation. But their scholarship, their intelligence, their lucid clarity of mind—these things, alas, it was never vouchsafed him to share.

He must have been better off for money than the others, or more probably through stinting himself when alone he was able to spend handsomely in their company and so give the impression of being well-to-do. Sometimes he would notice that they were short of money to buy a book, pay back a pressing debt or satisfy some other urgent need; whereupon he would insist, in the most friendly and generous manner, on helping them out. This earned him their gratitude and appreciation, but could scarcely make his stupidity any the more tolerable. They often failed to control their feelings and laughed at him to his face or jeered at his imbecilities without attempting to hide their pitiless contempt. The fellow took all this in good part, even with a smile. I doubt if they ever saw the slightest trace of anger in his face, for all the scorn and sarcasm that they heaped upon him. The funniest moments were when they teased him about his knowledge, or rather ignorance, of prosody. He was studying a book on grammar with them and could scarcely quote a single example—and God knows there is no dearth of them in the grammars. But once he had found one, nobody could be prompter than he in scanning it. His judgment never varied, for however complex the verse might be he always assigned it to the same simple metre, which was the only one he knew.

Strangely enough he was not content with this blind haste in identifying the metre, but would rush bald-headed into the scansion of the verse and torture it into submission. In a moment the whole company would be submerged in a rippling sea of laughter, which made study impossible for several minutes. This occurred so often that in the end they were tempted to take advantage of it and lead him on. So whenever he quoted a line of verse they would feign ignorance of the metre. He, of course, found no difficulty in assigning it to the only kind he knew. Whereupon they would pretend to hesitate over the scansion, and persuade him to force it willy-nilly into the same invariable pattern. Then the

storm of laughter would break out afresh, only to be welcomed by the victim with a benign smile, innocent either of anger or offence.

This young man lived with his friends for several years without ever losing his temper with them, or they with him. But eventually he understood that he was not of their mettle and could never hope to stay the course with them. So he began to drift away from lectures, on various pretexts, and gave up the hours of private study he had shared with the group. He contented himself with their company now and again at tea or some other meal, and on their visits, which he never failed to share.

Meanwhile the boy grew older and made progress at his work. The young man began to show him consideration and respect, and one day made the suggestion that they should work together. He actually wanted to exchange the society of his equals and contemporaries for that of a lad much younger than himself. So the boy took to reading books on logic with him, books on theology, books on tradition—but all without gaining the slightest benefit himself. Since he was not disposed to jeer at him or ridicule him, and in fact neither could nor would do any such thing, there was nothing for it but to get rid of the fellow and go on alone.

So this young man abandoned learning, or rather learning abandoned him. But his name remained on the list of students at the Azhar, and he continued to share the social side of his friends' life. They had been rising in the world a little, thanks to their qualities of intelligence and scholarship, and also to the favour and approval which they had earned from the Imam. They had formed friendships with one or two young men of well-to-do families, such as were to be found amongst the students of the Azhar at the time. They used to exchange visits with these rich young men, in which our friend also took part; and as they rose in the social scale, so did he. The others were scarcely aware of this process and paid little attention to it. They never boasted about the fine houses they went to, or the distinguished families they visited, but took it all as a matter of course. Not so their friend. He was overwhelmed by it all and drew an immense amount of pride and satisfaction from these connections, not to mention that he

often derived material benefits from them as well. At all events he could never stop talking about it, whether anyone wished to listen or not.

The days passed by, and these students went out into the world, each in his different direction. But our friend never forgot them and would not allow them to forget him. He had been unable to keep up with them in his studies, but why should he not go on sharing the other sides of their life? He would continue to visit them, whether or not they visited him, and accompany them when they called upon their rich or distinguished friends.

It was about this time that the Imam was forced by a political persecution to retire from the Azhar.¹ Our friend, oddly enough, was attached not only to the Imam and his friends but to the opposite party as well. The Azhar had been invaded by a political agitation which set the place in an uproar and split its inmates into two opposing camps. This fellow attached himself to the party which had started the agitation, but continued at the same time to maintain relations with their enemies, to whom he betrayed their secrets. Nemesis came one day—and what a day it was!—when he was discovered to be in communication with the police. His former friends cut off all contact with him, and he was denied access to the houses where he once was welcomed. He lay low in his room at the top of the building without a friend in the world. He had failed in his ambition to win a degree at the Azhar and now he would have to spend the rest of his life alone and in disgrace, enduring his ignominy as best he could and eking out with difficulty a miserable existence.

Then one day the news came that he was dead. Was it illness, want, or a broken heart? No one ever knew. But his friends received the news without either sorrow or regret. They could do no more than repeat the pious phrase which invariably serves on such occasions:

“We belong to God, and to Him we must return.”

¹ His resignation took place on 19th March 1905. See introduction.

IX

THE building was all but empty when the boy arrived there for the first time. It was after the Ramadan holiday, and the lodgers had not yet returned. This was how the boy discovered that the students liked to delay their return to Cairo, especially after this holiday, which marked the beginning of the university year. It was as if students and sheikhs felt a certain melancholy reluctance to leave their families and their villages, and prolonged their holidays for two or three days, perhaps even for a week or more. There was no objection to this; for the Azhar was still in that happy period when work-days and rest-days were not meticulously marked out, either for students or for lecturers. There was no rigid timetable to enforce attendance daily and hourly without fail. Everything was flexible and easy. The rector would fix the official date of return, but lecturers were free to begin when it suited them, and students might come to lectures as soon as they wished or found it convenient.

At that time the regulations were pleasantly elastic.¹ They relied much more on people's goodwill and enthusiasm than on rigid discipline or compulsory rules. They were better calculated to divide the sheep from the goats and to encourage students to work out of sheer love of learning rather than in obedience to orders or for fear of punishment.

This atmosphere of freedom and tolerance was keenly appreciated by students and sheikhs alike, though they took care not to abuse it. The first two weeks of the year were left free for people to do what they liked with, and served as a rule for renewing old friendships and making new ones. Students would trickle back from their villages and begin by paying each other visits of welcome before gently settling down to work. Lecturers too were in no very great haste to

¹ This was before the tightening up of teaching conditions by the Administrative Council of the Azhar under Muhammad 'Abdu. See introduction.

return from their homes and spent some time arranging their houses for the long stay in Cairo and calling on each other by way of friendly greeting, until finally, without either undue hurry or delay, they began their lectures. However, there were many, both among lecturers and students, who set more value on learning than on their families and their homes. Some of them stayed in Cairo over the holiday, studying in their rooms, at the Azhar itself, or at some other mosque. Others hastened to return to Cairo as soon as the opportunity occurred, in the hope of securing a few private lessons before the general courses began.

For these various reasons the tenement was practically empty when the boy and his brother arrived. There was no one living there but Uncle Hagg 'Aly, two of the young sheikh's friends, and the two Persians. But scarcely had the boy installed himself in the block before the other lodgers began coming back, singly or in groups, morning or evening. Soon the building was teeming with movement and activity and voices rang out on all sides, until the place seemed full to bursting point. It was in fact distinctly overcrowded. Some of the rooms were packed with students, and one of them actually contained no less than twenty.

How could they sit down? How could they study? How could they sleep? These were questions the boy asked himself, without finding any answer. He did know, however, that the rent of a room could scarcely exceed twenty-five piastres a month, and might well be as little as twenty, so that each student would pay only one piastre for a month's lodging.

This well illustrates the situation of those sons of the country who come up to Cairo in their multitudes to study theology at the Azhar. They acquire as much religious knowledge as they can, but not without contracting at the same time a host of maladies, physical, moral, and even intellectual.

The room next to the boy's on the right-hand side was empty for the first week. No sound or movement was to be heard in it. A second week followed upon the first, but still the room was vacant and still not a sound came from it. The students began asking themselves what had happened to the

sheikh who had lodged there before the fast. Had he perhaps moved from this block and gone to live elsewhere? But one night in the second week the boy woke up at the sound of Uncle Hagg 'Aly's voice piercing the darkness, and his stick belabouring the floor. Mystified as usual, he waited for the voice of the muezzin, then silently joined in the call to prayer. The voice ceased, and the boy's thoughts began to follow the worshippers at the mosque as they arrived for the service, some with quick, lively steps, others still heavy with sleep. But hark! What was that? A strange, shrill voice came through the wall behind the boy's head, penetrating his eardrum, and sending a shiver right through his body from head to foot. The boy has never since forgotten that voice and cannot think of it without laughing to himself, even if with an effort he can keep the smile from his lips. It was an extraordinary voice. At first it terrified him, then it convulsed him with laughter such as he found it impossible to control, despite his anxiety not to wake his brother. "Al . . . Al . . . Al . . . Allahu, Allahu, Allahu Ak . . . Al . . . Al . . . Allahu Ak . . . Allahu Ak . . . Allahu Akbar."

This was what the boy heard. The beginning and the repetitions were unintelligible, though he could recognise the end. However, the voice did not break off on finishing the phrase, but repeated it once or twice more, before finally setting it straight. Each letter took its right place in the chanter's mouth, then in the air, and lastly in the boy's ear and brain. After that the voice proceeded to recite the opening chapter of the Koran, and it was only then that the boy recognised it as the voice of a man praying. It went on reciting the *fātiha* until it came to the phrase: "Thee we worship, and in Thee is our succour," where it stuck on the final *s* and could go no further. Then it went back and started all over again: "Al . . . Al . . . Al . . . Allahu Ak . . . Al . . . Al . . ." It was at this point that the boy finally lost control and broke out into such a peal of laughter that his brother woke up with a start and asked what was the matter. The boy was incapable of replying; but as soon as his brother heard the voice on the other side of the wall no further explanation was necessary. He too could scarcely restrain his laughter. "Gently," he whispered, "that's our neighbour Sheikh So-

and-so, the Shâfi'ite.¹ He has come back, and is saying his morning prayer."

The young sheikh was too sleepy to say any more, and returned to his rest. The boy succeeded in controlling himself and followed the voice of the sheikh through the wall until, after heroic efforts, he finished his prayer. But there was still something that mystified the boy. Why did this Shâfi'ite sheikh inflict such a purgatory on himself? He had only finished his prayer after facing almost unsurmountable difficulties. In the morning the boy plucked up the courage to ask his brother about it. "This sheikh," he explained, "is conscientious to the point of obsession. He wants to make sure of his will to pray and to devote all his heart and mind to God from the beginning of his prayer to the end. So if you find he hesitates, or interrupts his prayer to go back to the beginning again, you must understand that he has been distracted by some worldly consideration and is trying to drive it away in order to concentrate his whole mind on the worship of God."

This sheikh was extremely quiet and scarcely gave any sign of life except when he said his prayers at dawn. It was many days before the boy could get used to his voice or listen to it without laughing. Yet at bottom he could only pity a victim of this demon of superstition, which, whether supernatural or not, can inflict such cruel obsessions on human beings.

Apart from the memory of his voice, there remain in the boy's mind only two stories about this sheikh. In one of these he was personally concerned, but the other he learnt only by hearsay. The first incident occurred when the boy was a good deal older and had advanced much further in his studies. It was at one of the sheikh's lectures, in which he was explaining the famous phrase in the *Talkhîs*:² "Every word varies in meaning according to its context." What a sea of ink has been wasted on this sentence, in abridgements and expansions, in commentaries and glosses, in criticisms and objections; while

¹ The Shâfi'ite is one of the four orthodox schools of law, to which most Egyptian Moslems belong.

² *Talkhîs al-Miftâh (Abridgement of the Key)* is an advanced book on rhetoric, of the early fourteenth century. It is abridged from a twelfth-century work entitled *Miftâh al-'Ulâm (The Key to the Sciences)*.

all the time it is a truth as clear as daylight, as unambiguous and unequivocal as can be. The sheikh, like many an Azharite before him, embarked upon the analysis of this sentence and the sifting of all the rigmarole that has been talked about it. He put himself to such exertions that before long his voice was hoarse, his brow ran with sweat, and all his strength was gone. Loyalty to learning, without a doubt, is a burden such as none but the strongest can support.

The boy began to criticise some of the sheikh's statements, as he used to do with all the teachers. But the sheikh pounced upon him with a crushing reply, which filled him in a moment with confusion, resentment and contempt. "Give it up, my lad," he said. "All this is too much for you. You're only fit for the husk which you'll get at the end of the morning. As for the juice, it's not for you, nor you for it." With this he laughed, and the whole class joined in. The boy was ashamed to leave the lesson in the middle, so he bore up in silence till the end, when a friend took him away. The "husk" to which the sheikh referred was a lecture on literature, at which among other books Mubarrad's *Kâmil*¹ was studied. From that day the sheikh declined in the boy's estimation and he came eventually to detest a man he had once loved and respected. The sheikh became a target for the boy's wit as he laughed and joked with his companions before and after the "husk."

The second of the two stories occasioned nothing but the most hearty laughter and amusement; it even stimulated the boy to poetry. It was indeed the simplest and most commonplace of occurrences—but what can be simpler than the laughter of youth?

The sheikh had a son who was not noticeably intelligent and had nothing about him to suggest that he had been born for a life of study. He was, nevertheless, a student. He lived in his father's room, and was just as quiet and just as unobtrusive a neighbour as his father. One day, or rather one night, a group of friends came to visit the father, and asked his son for coffee. After a while he brought the coffee, and the sheikhs

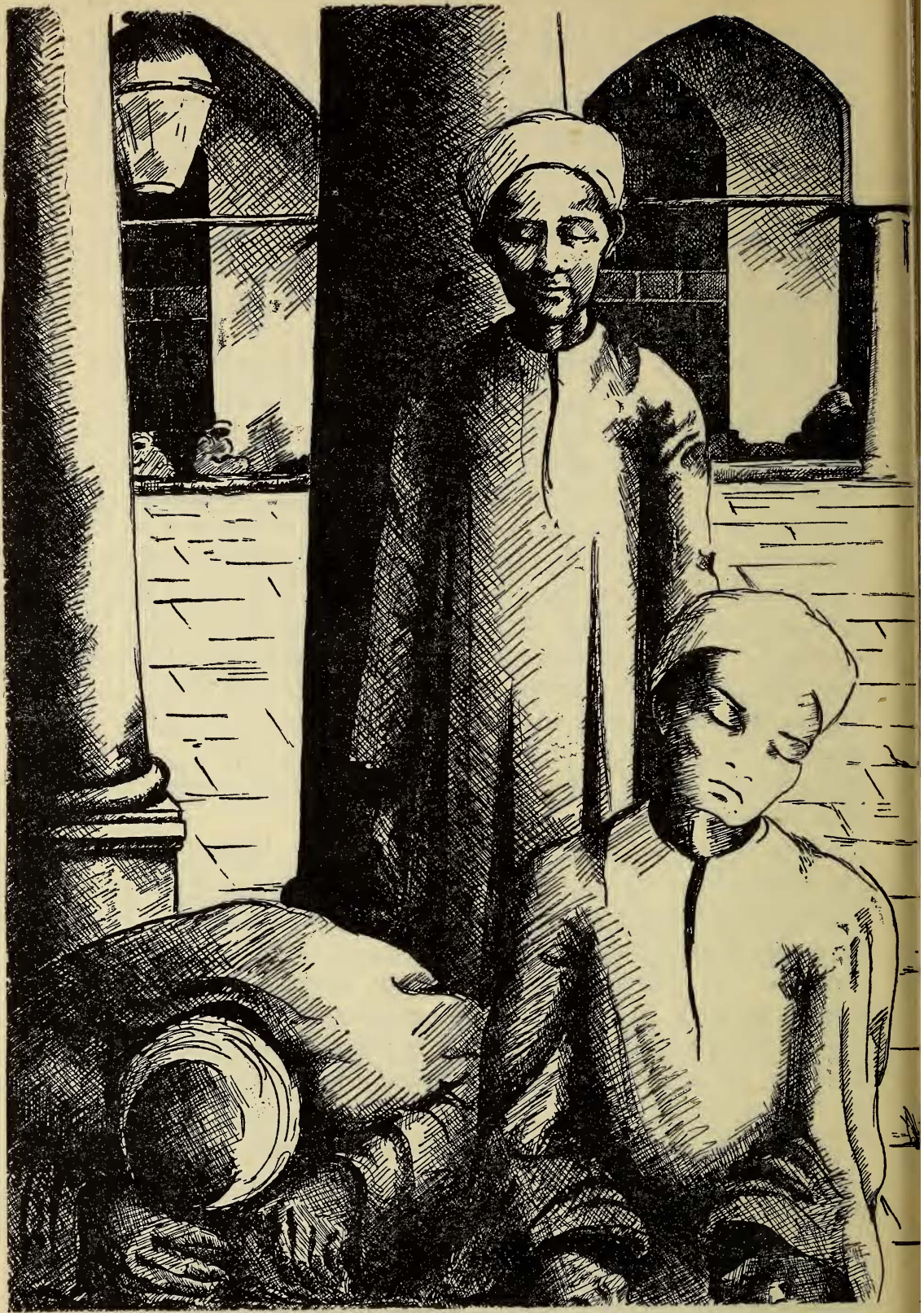
¹ Mubarrad (826–868) was born at Basra, studied under El-Jâhiz (v.n. p. 7), and taught at Baghdad under the 'Abbasids. The *Kâmil* (lit. *Complete*) is an extremely varied medley of traditions, proverbs, poems and anecdotes, accompanied by extensive grammatical commentary, which is the main aim of the book.

took up their cups as lickerishly as ever. They took a sip at it, or rather a long, noisy suck; but scarcely had the liquid reached their throats before they spewed it out with a rush. They all began coughing and spluttering convulsively in the effort to expel it from their throats. A mixture of coffee and saliva dribbled onto their beards and ran down onto their *kuftâns* as they went on coughing in the most extreme discomfort. What they had drunk was not coffee, but snuff. The sheikh's son had made a mistake and mixed up the coffee-pot with the snuff-box.

The incident in which the boy was concerned, at the sheikh's lecture on rhetoric, had a curious sequel. He abandoned this sheikh in favour of another who had a room next to his in the block where the boy lived. This man was a Shâfi'ite too, though he did not have the same obsession. He was the quietest and gravest of men, as kind-hearted as he was niggardly of speech. Apart from an occasional greeting to himself or one of his friends, the boy had never heard him utter a word. The day after leaving the first sheikh he attended a lecture by this colleague of his under the dome of the Mosque of Muhammad Bey Abu-l-Dhahab. The boy knew this mosque very well, as he had listened to lectures on grammar and logic in almost every corner of it. Later on in this history there will be other stories to tell of things which took place there.¹

Here, then, the boy came at noon, after the "husk" lecture. He climbed the steps he knew so well, took off his shoes, and walked forward between two familiar lecture-groups. Then he stepped over the threshold of the dome and sat down in the circle of waiting students. It was not long before the sheikh arrived, in his usual quiet manner, and began the lesson. After glorifying God and invoking blessings on the Prophet, he started to read a text on the peculiar qualities of the indefinite subject. He eventually came to a quotation made by the author from the Koran: "A sign of approval from God is no mean thing." Then following the author, the scholiast, the marginal commentator and the editor he dis-

¹ Muhammad Abu-l-Dhahab the Mameluke was virtual ruler of Egypt towards the end of the eighteenth century. His mosque is one of the finest examples in Cairo of the Ottoman style.



cussed the indefiniteness of the phrase "a sign of approval" in terms which did not please the young man at all. He found it impossible to contain himself, and started to criticise what the sheikh had been saying. But scarcely had he begun before the sheikh interrupted him, and said in his calm, placid voice: "Be quiet, my lad. May God open your eyes and grant you pardon; and may He deliver us from mischief-makers like you. Fear the wrath of God, and cease to plague us at this lecture. Go back where you came from, to your mid-morning husk, where the blind mislead the blind."

This rebuke provoked a general roar of laughter. The young man bowed his head and remained speechless with rage as the sheikh continued his reading and commentary in the same calm, unruffled tone. He stayed sullenly where he was until the circle broke up, and then went off in a mood of bitter fury.

He was thus excluded from rhetoric lectures for the rest of the year. At noon, after the "husk," he used to go off to the library at Bab El-Khalq and stay there almost until closing-time just before sundown.

Was it a coincidence that the two sheikhs should both have dismissed the young man from their lectures, or was it a concerted plan? He never knew. In any case the recital of these two incidents is a little premature. We had best return from this digression to the tenement and its occupants, and see what was happening there when the young student first arrived.

X

A ROOM in the right-hand corner of the building was occupied by a family whose presence there the boy found difficult to explain. How had they come to the building in the first place, and once there why had they stayed in a room surrounded on both sides by students? They would really have done better to settle on the lower floor amongst the tradesmen and labourers. Instead they had gone up into the realms of learning and settled there in the midst of the students and teachers. They never made a nuisance of themselves and no one annoyed them; but they never struck up a friendship, or even an acquaintance, with anybody.

This family seemed no less out of place in Cairo generally than it was in the tenement. The dialect they spoke showed that they had come down from Upper Egypt, from the furthest south. Perhaps that was why they had gone on up to the second floor, instead of stopping at the first; for all the lodgers on the second floor were strangers: a sheikh from Alexandria, two Persians, and various students and teachers from different parts of the country. Among all these strangers such a family had no reason to feel out of place. On the other hand the workers and tradesmen who lived on the first floor of the block were all of them Cairenes, or had spent so long in Cairo that they had adopted its language and customs, and were indistinguishable from natives.

This family was composed of two members: an old woman, who must have been over sixty, and would have found it difficult, not to say impossible, to pick up the language and manners of Cairo; and her son, a young man between twenty and thirty, who would be able in the course of time to adapt himself to the speech and customs of the capital. The mother was without an occupation, like all the women who come down from Upper Egypt to a town like Cairo, and settle in one room of a tenement such as this.

She had no occupation, that is to say, to earn her living by,

but she did her fair share of the work of the family. It was the son's business to trudge the streets all day and bring back something to eat in the evening, while the mother looked after the house and got the food ready for her son and herself.

The son was a pedlar, and made his own goods for sale. He began work in his room at dawn, and towards midday, when the sun was high, he went out into the road with what he had produced and began to sing its praises as he wandered through streets and byways wherever his feet carried him. He might go far or he might stay near, but he never came back until he had sold everything. In winter he used to carry a kind of sweet called "Maiden's Thread," and in summer another sort called either "Gelâti" or "Dandourma."¹

As he prepared these delicacies the young man sang aloud for joy; or so it seemed, at least, for he may have been forcing himself. When he had finished his work he took what he had made and walked past our rooms in complete silence, waiting until he was down the staircase and into the passage-way before bursting into song with his fine, delicate voice to praise the confectionery he carried with him and invite the girls and women to be his customers. It was as if the young man allowed himself the luxury of singing when he was in his room, but held himself back as he passed by the rooms of serious, dignified folk like sheikhs and students. When he reached street level he took the liberty which all pedlars have of singing out his wares and calling for customers. He must have felt that it would be out of place to vaunt the merits of his confectionery outside rooms like these. They were serious people who wouldn't bother about such things as sweets; their taste was for learning alone. In all probability the young pedlar was mistaken, and in fact there were many people in the block who adored his song and yearned for "Maiden's Thread" or ices; they would certainly have liked to stop him, and be the first to buy from him, if they had been able to. But they never did so; they were too shy—or too short of money.

Then one day there came a stop to his songs and the ring

¹ Words taken from Italian and Turkish, meaning ices.

of the dishes in which he stirred his sweets. Other songs and other voices were to be heard in their stead. Women came in and out of his room, shouting and laughing at first, then singing and crying out for joy and thrumming on tambourines, until for sheikhs and students life became unbearable.

But for the boy it was all delight, all ecstasy. These drumming and songs and cries of joy reminded him of his country home. They aroused in him as thrilling a pleasure—though by no means the same—as he found in listening to the voices of his teachers when they chanted their lessons in the mosque.

Then for a while other sounds broke in upon the women's cries of joy. It was the porters bringing furniture to the room and cluttering up staircase and passages with it. They shouted and joked, cursed and encouraged each other by turns, while the women welcomed them and took the things from them with thrumming of tambourines and ecstatic cries and songs. Now and again a carol of joy rang out from a woman on the lower floor. Perhaps all that she heard and saw made her remember her own wedding, or dream of the time when her son or daughter would be married—one of those days that never come again. So she joined her songs and shouts of joy to those of the women above, though she had no ties of friendship with the bridegroom's people. But joy is as infectious as sorrow, and among the Egyptians nothing catches so quickly.

Then the great day arrived, a Thursday. The sheikhs and students had been bothered a good deal by all this uproar, and the most industrious of them had left their rooms and gone right away from the tenement to look for the peace and quiet they needed at the houses of friends or in the mosques. Thursday came, and the uproar rose higher and higher until it burst all ordinary bounds and flooded out into the street. A marquee was pitched, and in the afternoon a band began to play. Then people from other neighbourhoods came along in the highest of spirits. They ate, and greeted each other with compliments and listened happily to the singing. All this while the boy clung to his window and let not a single thing escape him. He had forgotten learning and the learned, Azhar and Azharites, yes, even lunch and tea, in his fascination. He was enraptured at the band—he had never heard

one in Cairo before—at all the varied folksongs echoing out in the twilight, and at the chanting of the hired sheikh as night began to fall.

The boy's brother and his friends had been rude enough that day to leave the building altogether. As for him, he did not move from where he was until night came on. Uncle Hagg 'Aly all but came out of his room to pierce the night with his call to prayer and belabour the floor with his stick. But if he had no one would have heard his voice or paid attention to his knocking. What were they beside all the tumult and hullabaloo that were making sleep impossible for the whole neighbourhood? Suddenly there came a hideous shriek, drawn out in agony, then cries of joy that almost danced around it, songs of rejoicing like a descant to that savage cry of pain. The young man had taken his bride.

Then night came on, grave and slow, to stretch its great black hand over all these things. Already the lanterns were extinguished and the voices hushed. Sleep stole into the quarter like a thief to gather everyone into his arms. Except the boy. He never moved from his window, thinking and thinking of that long-drawn wail and the tumult of glee that had danced all around it. He was recalled to his senses by a voice just beside him declaring that the night was over and that prayer was better than sleep. True: prayer is better than sleep; but of sleep that night the boy had had none. However, he rose and performed his ablutions so that he was ready to pray when the muezzin finished his call to prayer. Then he rolled himself up in his blanket and stretched out on his old rug and lost himself in sleep. He was aware of nothing more until Uncle Hagg 'Aly came when the sun was already high, and with a violent crash on the door shouted his familiar call: "Get up, you lads, get up!"

XI

THIS sketch of the tenement and of the boy's early surroundings in Cairo would be incomplete without some mention of two other kinds of people: those who lived in the building, and yet were strangers there, and those who only dropped in from time to time, but seemed like permanent residents. Amongst the first was a sheikh over fifty years old who had studied for his degree with all the energy and persistence of which he was capable, but never attained more than a smattering of learning. Every time he took the examination he failed, and was considered a hopeless case by everyone but himself. He may have lived in the building, in a physical sense, but his spirit was elsewhere. He was ashamed to go back to his village and acknowledge his failure; so he stayed on in Cairo amidst the scenes of his unavailing efforts, and directed the affairs of his family from a distance. He would tear himself away to visit them late on Thursday evening and be back in his room early on Saturday morning. He had money of his own, in fact more than a competence; and in the midst of these impecunious students he lived the life of a well-to-do countryman. His room was elegantly furnished, and he stayed there from morn till night, with only very occasional excursions, so as to give the impression that he was studying by himself. He had already mastered his subject and got all the books by heart, so that there was no need for him to go to lectures and hear what the sheikhs had to say. If he had had any sort of luck, if the fates had encouraged him in the slightest, he would have been a sheikh like them, delivering lectures to a crowd of pupils. He had been their friend when they were students, and had gone with them to Sheikh Imbâby's lectures or on visits to Sheikh Ashmûny. But fortune had favoured them and frowned upon himself, so now they were teachers while he still remained where he was, stuck between two stools, half-student and half-sheikh.

Nevertheless he had acquired most of the habits proper to

a teacher. He did not go to lectures with the young men or read books with them. Now and again he would condescend to meet them, either at their invitation or his own, over a meal or a cup of tea. His manner would be half-friendly, half-smug, as he talked in a calm, resonant voice, emphasizing every letter. His conversation, however, was not at all learned. It was academic only in the sense that it frequently concerned the teachers of the Azhar, most of whom he heartily disparaged. If he did have a good word to say for any of them he was always as sparing in his praise as he was liberal in abuse. Other subjects of his were money, his household arrangements, the way he was looked up to in his home village, the reputation he enjoyed in the district, and in fact the whole province; then his brothers, who were such good farmers, and the fine young man, so intelligent and so ill-starred, who had not yet qualified for his elementary certificate, though he was getting on for twenty. Not that he was incapable or stupid; he was merely thwarted by fate. The family decided that fate must be defied; and the sheikh set himself to rescue his brother, so that together they might rise out of obscurity into fame and fortune. He resolved to enter him at the Military College and make a gallant officer of him, not with just one pip on his shoulder, but two at least, and maybe more.

But fate was stronger than the sheikh and his family. The young man was refused by the Military College on the grounds that his attainments did not satisfy the examiners. The sheikh only cursed fate again and determined to defeat it.

All this story was told in an endless flow of words, broken only by the bubbling of the *narghile* which was brought him by the café proprietor in the morning and afternoon, and at nightfall, or sometimes prepared by himself or his small servant. This made a deep impression on the students, who were as astonished at the sheikh's affluence as they were contemptuous of his ignorance and stupidity.

The boy well remembers how one day the sheikh decided to get rid of some of his furniture, and buy better and more expensive things. So he offered the old ones to the students. None of them were tempted except the boy's brother, who bought a cupboard composed of two pieces set one on top

of the other. The lower piece had two solid doors, and was used to hold in its upper part the young sheikh's clothes, and at the bottom those of his books which were unbound and therefore better hidden. In one corner he stored cakes and other sweet food. At the top of the lower piece were two drawers which the young sheikh set aside for his odd papers and for money. When the month's allowance arrived he would put it in one of these two drawers and draw it out in small quantities day by day, keeping the two keys in his pocket. The upper piece of the cupboard had two glass doors, and contained the bound books, which were worth putting on show.

The sheikh bargained hard over his cupboard, which was of walnut wood, and pushed the price up above a pound. The young man paid; but the purchase weighed heavily on him and his brother for many months. The price had to be paid in instalments taken out of their slender monthly remittance from the country. Then of course books had to be bought and put in elegant bindings, so that the young sheikh's name on their backs would show up smartly through the glass. All this had to be paid for out of the month's allowance; so the two students were forced to cut down their meagre standard of living. Then the allowance would stand the strain no longer, and there was nothing for it but to borrow. All too little cash was put away in the drawer, and urgent requests had to be sent to the boy's father to increase their allowance, or to add something to it from time to time.

Nevertheless, the arrival of this cupboard cheered the boy a great deal, and brought him many an hour of contented enjoyment. The young sheikh had a long, deep chest which had been familiar to the boy in his childhood, when his mother used to keep her clothes in it, and especially the most precious of them. This chest had a slightly convex lid which on being lifted revealed its hollow depths. The boy thought it a marvel, especially when he discovered the two secret drawers in which his mother used to keep her valuables—when she had any. Then one day the box was missing from its place in the house, and nowhere could he find it. Many a time had the boy played around it with his sisters or

sat cross-legged upon it, as they squatted on the ground in front of him while he told them stories or listened to theirs.

The reason why the chest could not be found was that it had been carried off to the Nile to be put on a boat for Cairo. There it was to be collected by the young sheikh and used to contain his clothes and any books for which he could find no proper place. The boy bitterly regretted this chest. He was compelled after this, when he chatted with his sisters, to squat on the bare ground where it had been.

When the boy moved to Cairo he looked forward eagerly to touching the chest, and sitting upon it and running his fingers over its smooth wood. But the chest was a long way from his place, tucked away in a corner where it was difficult for him to get at. When the new cupboard was bought, however, and the young sheikh's clothes and books were shifted into that, the chest lost its importance and was relegated to a neglected corner of the lobby, on the boy's left as he came in. "In this chest," he was told, "you can put your clothes and any books you may buy." From that time the boy used to leave his corner during the course of the day and go into the lobby. He was shy of perching on top of the chest for fear of being laughed at, but he used to go and sit beside it near the doorway with his back propped against the wall and his hand resting on the chest, waiting for an opportunity to climb up on top of it and run his hands lovingly over it. Or he would raise the lid and feel in one or other of the drawers, though he never found anything in them. And sometimes he would bend down to reach the few clothes that lay in the bottom and turn them contentedly over and over, as if they were treasure for which he had found a secret hiding place. The days went by, and little by little the chest filled up with books.

There was another person who lived in the building as a stranger and yet became the companion of many of the students and fast friend to them all. He was tall, and quite remarkably shortsighted. He had spent a long time studying at the Azhar and had lived in the building for many years. He made great efforts to learn, but somehow learning managed to escape him. He was a stranger not only to the students but also to the books which lined his room. He had

attended lectures regularly and listened to lecturers in plenty, until in despair he ensconced himself in his room and scarcely ever came out except to visit some other room in the block and gossip with its occupant. But then his friends used to leave him in order to study or go to lectures, so eventually he gave up visiting them too. And yet he was kind-hearted, unassuming and pleasant to talk to; extremely dependable and as quick to help his friends in need as he was patient if they found it hard to pay him back.

They had a great affection for him and always sang his praises. They liked visiting him and took a real pleasure in his company and conversation. So he could not bring himself either to leave Cairo or to move out of the building, though he despaired of his academic career. He stayed on in Cairo where he had been living, or rather let life flow by him, for so many years. He was no longer a student, nor yet a fellah, but something between the two. From time to time relatives or fellow-villagers came to visit him, bringing country delicacies which he would immediately invite his friends to share, or take as presents to their rooms. As long as they remained in the building these students could never mention their friend without affection and esteem. Then they parted, each on his own road, and lost touch with him, but whenever they mentioned him it was always in the most flattering of terms.

There was another person who was always about the building, though he neither had a room of his own nor stayed in any particular spot. It was not easy to meet him, much less to speak with him; but he was frequently the subject of hushed conversations among the young men, whose quick, furtive whispers would give rise to chuckles of laughter soon disciplined by shame. This individual paid visits but never received any. He never came alone, but always with some other visitor. He never appeared in the daytime or in the first part of the night or in the early morning. He came only in the dead of night, at the time of the deepest sleep.

His visit was pleasant enough at the beginning, but its aftermath was gall and bitterness for those he visited. It depressed them more often than not, and invariably interfered with their work and had a bad effect on their health.

It predisposed them to illness and particularly to winter colds.

This personage was commonly called Abu Tartûr.¹ It must take a devil, to be sure, to pay such visits as these, under cover of night, to a young man asleep on his bed. When he was gone the victim would wake up in alarm, overcome by a sense of guilt and dismay, to await the approach of dawn. Then he would leap smartly out of bed, leaving plenty of time to wash himself thoroughly and go spotless to the first lecture of the day. It was simple enough in summer; for what could be easier or more pleasant for a young man than to bathe himself in cold water in one of the basins in the mosques, or to pour over himself enough water to cover his body and fulfil the conditions of the ritual. But when Abu Tartûr passed by on a winter's night what effort and what agony it meant! His victim would have no time to boil hot water and might well be too poor, if not in too much hurry, to go to one of the public baths. So Abu Tartûr was not content with wasting a young man's time but must needs waste his money too.

But there was no escape. The Azhar and its lectures were calling, and it was essential to arrive in a state of cleanliness both moral and physical. There was nothing for it but to give oneself a hasty rub-over with cold water before leaving for the Azhar. It was better still to bathe in one of the basins in the mosques; that cost no more than a shiver. At home water had to be paid for and must not be used except for drinking, unless the need was urgent. And even urgent needs had to bow before economy.

There was no end to the wiles Abu Tartûr would use to gain an entrance. He seemed to lie in ambush in a corner at the top of the stairs, paying no attention to the students while they were reading or preparing their lessons. But as soon as they stopped working and went off to talk to the old man in the left-hand corner of the block or the middle-aged student in the furthest room on the right—up leapt Abu Tartûr and stole in upon them unawares when they were neither looking nor listening for him. He sidled through the

¹ Literally "Wearer of a Fool's Cap." Equivalent to something like "Daddy Vice" or "Old Mr. Devil."

room and insinuated himself into the person of the old man or the middle-aged student.¹ He spoke through their lips and with their voices, arousing in the minds of their listeners the unwholesome thoughts which study had kept away. When they left their host to go to their beds and sleep Abu Tartûr had already marked down his prey for that guilty visitation.

Sometimes Abu Tartûr would lurk in his corner at the top of the stairs till the girl from the floor below came up to bring one of the students his newly-washed clothes or to take his dirty ones to the laundry. Abu Tartûr met her and walked on beside her, without being either seen or heard. No sooner had the girl come into the young man's room than Abu Tartûr would twist himself into a glance from the girl's eye or a word rippling off her tongue; he would be the smile flickering across her lips, or a movement in one of her limbs.

Then the girl would go off, and Abu Tartûr would go with her, unseen, unheard, unguessed at. But he had made an appointment with that young man which he would not fail to keep in the depths of night when he was fast asleep.

Sometimes Abu Tartûr would show remarkable astuteness and bring to bear a whole battery of tricks and ruses. Without bothering to climb to the top landing he would steal in among the women on the lower floor, as they quarrelled or laughed or chattered at the top of their voices till the sounds blended into a veritable concert. Then Abu Tartûr would try his shifts. It might be a golden peal from one of those voices or a quiver in their limbs—was it something human or a devilish shot from Abu Tartûr that flew up at the young man on the floor above, and in a moment was gone?—but not without leaving the poison in his blood and making an assignation which the devil would keep at midnight.

So the life of these students in their building and the Azhar was not altogether unalloyed. It was not all study. And the same was true of the boy. Abu Tartûr was never far away, ready to visit them with his scourge of pleasure and regret. In the conversations which followed these visits the boy found ample matter for reflection.

¹ The old man is Uncle Hagg 'Aly, see Chapter VI. The middle-aged man is the subject of Chapter VII.

XII

SUCH was the building in which the boy settled and the surroundings in which he lived. In all probability the experience of life and of human character which he gained there at first hand were at least as beneficial to him as the progress he made at the Azhar in grammar and logic, law and theology.

Two or three days after he arrived his brother handed him over to a sheikh who had won his degree that same summer and was to begin teaching for the first time in his life by taking a class of boys. He was a man round about forty, with a reputation for soundness and intelligence. He had wrestled with fortune and won. It was not, to be sure, a victory equal to his merits, for though he had done well to pass and be placed in the second class, he was thought extremely unlucky not to have got into the first. His intelligence was limited to book learning. When he ventured on practical affairs he showed himself more of a simpleton than anything else. He was known among his friends, teachers and students alike, as a man passionately addicted to material pleasures, to which he was drawn not so much by vice or perversion as by a natural extravagance of impulse. He was a notoriously big eater, with an insatiable craving for meat. Not for one single day could he restrain that colossal appetite, however great the demands it made upon him.

Apart from this he had a most extraordinary voice, at once tremulous and jerky. He tried to cut off one syllable from another, but they would persist in getting jumbled together again, though he opened his lips much wider than he should have done. No one could talk to him for long without laughing, and sooner or later you were bound to start aping the tremors and jerks of his voice and the way in which he mouthed his words.

He had scarcely taken his degree before he rushed off to

buy the insignia, including the doctor's gown, which he started to wear immediately. In the normal way the sheikhs never wore it until some time after they had earned their degrees, when they had already built up a certain reputation and found themselves in easier circumstances.

But this fellow took to a gown straight away, much to the amusement of his friends, both sheikhs and students. They laughed all the more sarcastically in that, although he wore a gown, he went as barefoot as a beggar—inside his shoes. He never wore socks, either because he couldn't afford to, or for abstinence' sake. In the streets he affected a ponderous stride and a lofty academic air, but as soon as he had stepped over the threshold of the Azhar all his gravity vanished and he broke into an undignified trot.

The boy recognised his step before he heard his voice. Arriving for his first lecture with the usual shambling gait, he tripped over the boy and almost fell; his sockless ankles touched the boy, and their coarse skin scratched his hand. He went on and sat down, propping his back for the first time where he had for so long yearned to put it, against the lecturer's column.

This sheikh, like many of his contemporaries, was at once highly accomplished in the sciences of the Azhar and severely critical of the traditional method of teaching. He had been much influenced by the teaching of the Imam, but had not really taken it to heart. He was neither a genuine reformer nor yet a die-hard, but something between the two. This was enough to make the sheikhs look askance at him and regard him with a certain anxiety and mistrust. At the very beginning of his first lecture on sacred law he announced to his class that he had no intention of reading with them the book which beginners were usually started on, *Marâqy-l-Falâh 'âla Nûr el-Idâh*,¹ but that he would give them lessons of his own, which would be well up to the level of *Marâqy-l-Falâh*. Their job was to listen carefully, make sure that they understood and take what notes they needed. He then began his lecture, which proved extremely useful and interesting. He followed the same method in his grammar lectures. He

¹ *Steps to Success* from *The Light of Clarity*, a Hanafite text-book dating from the eleventh century.

neither read El-Kafrâwy's *Commentary*,¹ nor taught the nine ways of reciting "Bismillah ir-Rahmân ir-Rahîm"² and the syntax of its inflexions. He gave them a solid grounding in grammar, defining the word and the sentence, the noun, the verb and the particle. This lecture too was both clear and interesting.

At tea-time that afternoon the boy was asked what he had been told at his law and grammar lessons. When he repeated what he had heard to his brother and the rest of the group they were pleased with what he told them about the sheikh and approved his method of teaching. So the boy continued to attend these two lectures every weekday, for how long he cannot remember. He was continually wondering when he would be admitted to the Azhar as a regular student and have his name inscribed on the registers. As yet he was merely a boy attending no more than two lectures in a regular, organised way. He went to one other, the lecture on tradition after the dawn prayer, but that was only to fill in the time till his brother came away from his lecture on first principles, which was when the law lesson began.

At last the great day came. After the lecture on law the boy was told to present himself for a test in the recitation of the Koran, which was to qualify him for entry to the Azhar. He had not been notified beforehand and so had not prepared for the examination at all. If he had been given notice he would have gone through the Koran once or twice by himself before the test, but it had not occurred to him to recite the Koran since the day of his arrival in Cairo. So when he was told that he was to be examined in an hour's time his heart began to throb with anxiety. He hurried off to the scene of the examination at the Chapel of the Blind in a state of extreme nervousness and trepidation. However, as soon as he came face to face with the examiners his fear suddenly left him and gave place to the bitterest distress. Something happened then which he was never to forget. He had been waiting for the two examiners to finish with the student before him when

¹ This book and Khâlid's (p. 81) are the two most valued commentaries on the fourteenth-century *Agurrumiya*, the main elementary grammar in use at the Azhar to this day.

² "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"—the opening words of the Koran.

suddenly he heard one of them call him in words which fell cruelly on his ears and seared his heart with anguish: "You next, blind boy."

It would never have occurred to him that these words were addressed to himself if it had not been for his brother, who without saying a word seized him none too gently by the hand and led him in front of the examiners. He had been used to great consideration on this point from his family, who avoided mentioning the affliction in his presence. He appreciated this delicacy on their part, though he never forgot his blindness and was always brooding upon it. Despite this shock he sat down in front of the examiners, who asked him to recite the *sura* of the Cave. But he had scarcely started on this before he was told to turn to the *sura* of the Spider; and after a few verses of that one of the examiners said "That's enough, blind boy, you're admitted."

The boy was scandalised by this examination, which had no sense in it at all and was no test of memory whatever. He had been expecting at the very least that the board would examine him on the grammar which his father used to test at home. He went off very pleased with his success but furious with the examiners, whose negligence he found inexcusable. Before he left the Chapel of the Blind, however, his brother drew him off to one side, where a servant took his right arm and put a token round his wrist consisting of a piece of thread connected by a leaden seal. "That's all," said the man. "Congratulations!"

The boy did not understand the meaning of this token. But his brother explained that he must keep it on his wrist for a full week until he had seen the doctor, who would examine his health, estimate his age and vaccinate him against smallpox.

The boy had reason to be excited over this bracelet, since it was the token of his success at the qualifying examination. The first lap, then, was over; except that he was still haunted by the brutal words with which the examiner had summoned and dismissed him. The week ran its course in the usual way. He woke at the sound of Uncle Hagg 'Aly's voice; left for the Azhar at dawn and came back after the lecture on law; returned to the Azhar again at noon for the lecture on

grammar, then stayed still in his corner until night. Next morning he would be off to the Azhar as soon as he heard the muezzin cry "Prayer is better than sleep."

The day of the medical examination arrived and the boy turned up for it in a state of trepidation; he was afraid that the doctor might summon him in the same way as the examiners had done. Nothing of the sort, however; there was no summoning this time at all. The boy's brother piloted him to the doctor, who took his arm and made the necessary incisions. "Fifteen," he said, and that was all. So now the boy was on the list of students at the Azhar, though he had not yet reached the age mentioned by the doctor and required by the regulations. He was only thirteen. However, the bracelet was taken off his wrist and he went back home full of misgivings as to the good faith of the examiners and of the doctor. He scarcely knew whether to laugh or to weep.

XIII

THIS manner of life was painful not only for himself but for his brother too. The boy was dissatisfied with his progress at the Azhar and longed to attend more lectures and broach new subjects. His isolation up in his room after the grammar lecture was a misery almost too great for him to bear. He was starved for talk and movement and wanted, if humanly possible, to have more of both. His brother, too, found it irksome to have to take the boy to the Azhar and bring him back home, morning and afternoon. He hated, too, having to leave him in solitude. But then there was no alternative. It was impossible for him, or at least incompatible with his life as a student, to leave his friends and interrupt his studies in order to stop at home and keep his brother company.

The boy never opened his mind to anyone about this, nor did his brother mention the subject, though in all probability he discussed the question more than once with his friends. Then one night the problem came to a head and finally reached a solution without either the boy or his brother saying a word about it to the other.

One day the group had been invited for the evening to the house of a Syrian friend who did not live in the block or even in the same district. The invitation was accepted. The day passed by in its usual course; the group went off to the Imam's lecture and came back after the last prayer of the day to drop their papers and portfolios.

The young sheikh got his brother ready for bed as usual and then left him, after putting out the lamp as his custom was every evening. But he had barely reached the door before the boy felt himself so overwhelmed by misery that he could scarcely restrain himself from bursting into tears. Probably a half-stifled sob reached his brother's ears. He did not change his plans or abandon the party, but locked the door as usual and went on his way. The boy cried till he could cry no more and gradually began to recover his balance. But it was the

same this night as ever; he could not go off to sleep until his brother came back. And it was morning before his brother appeared. He had already been to his law lecture and breakfasted on some cakes which he had bought on his way back from the party. The boy and his brother understood each other without exchanging a word.

A day or two later the young sheikh was given a letter by El-Hagg Firûz. He opened it and read it; then, putting his hand on the boy's shoulder, he said in a voice full of tenderness and affection: "From tomorrow you won't be alone in the room any longer. Your cousin is coming up to the Azhar to be a student and to keep you company."

XIV

THIS cousin was a companion of his childhood and a very dear friend. He had often come up from his village in the south of the province to visit the boy and spend a month or two with him. They used to go and play together at school and say their prayers together at the mosque, then come home before sundown to read storybooks, amuse themselves with games of various sorts or take a walk beside the mulberry-bushes that lined the Ibrahimiya Canal. They had many a time toyed with dreams for the future and had made a compact to go up to Cairo and study together at the Azhar.

More than once this friend had come up from his home town at the end of the summer, bringing money and supplies given him by his mother so that he might go up to Cairo with his cousin and study there. Together they had waited, first in impatience, then in irritation, and finally in misery and even in tears. The family, or rather the young sheikh, thought that the time was not yet ripe for them to go up to Cairo. So they would part, and the cousin would go back, bitterly disappointed, to his mother.

It was no wonder, then, that this news caused intense delight to the boy. He passed a joyful afternoon, thinking only of tomorrow. Evening came on and filled the room with shadows, but that night there seemed to be neither sound nor movement in the room. In all probability the insects were playing their usual games, but the boy neither heard nor felt anything at all.

He spent a sleepless night, but only because he was so excited and happy. The time seemed to pass all too slowly and he longed impatiently for the morning. He went off to the lecture on tradition and heard the rise and fall of the sheikh's voice as he distinguished between the text and the authority, but paid no real attention to what he was saying and understood not a thing. Then he went on to the lecture on law, which he could not help attending to. His brother

had introduced him to the sheikh, who used to ask him questions and start discussions with him; so he was forced to listen and understand. In the middle of the morning he went back to his room and spent the next hours in a state of mingled calm and agitation.

He was calm on the surface, because the last thing he wanted to do was to let either his brother or his brother's friends see that anything was in any way changed for him. But within himself he was fretting against the slow passage of time and longing impatiently for the afternoon, when his cousin's train would arrive at Cairo station.

At last the muezzin gave the call to afternoon prayer and all that separated the boy and his cousin was the time a cart takes to cover the distance between the station and the boy's home, past Bab El-Bahr and Bab El-Sha'riya, and then along to the old gateway, through which it would turn into the passage between the bubbling of the *narghile* and the smoke of the café opposite.

When those familiar steps echoed in the building the boy recognised them in a moment. Here was his cousin at last, throwing him a merry greeting, and now they were kissing each other and laughing happily together. The coachman followed with the food and sweets which the family had sent for the two of them. It was clear that they would have a rich supper that evening, which all their friends would be there to share, and that the two boys would not be alone to talk to each other until the others went off together to the Imam's lecture.

Another thing was certain. From that day the boy's life was changed for good and all. His solitude was a thing of the past, so much so that he sometimes even regretted it; and he forged ahead with his work so fast that now and again he felt overwhelmed.

XV

THE most obvious practical change was that he left his place in the corner of the room on that old carpet spread over a tattered, worn-out mat. He scarcely used it any more except when he sat down to lunch or supper and when he retired to bed at nightfall. Almost the whole of his day was spent at the Azhar and in the other mosques nearby where lectures might also take place. When he came back to the tenement he only slipped into the room to take off his coat, and then went outside again to sit with his companion on a strip of felt mattress which was spread out in front of the door and took up more than half the passage, so that there was no space for more than one or two people to walk past.

The two boys passed their time either talking or, more frequently, reading. They broke off now and again to attend to anything interesting which occurred on the floor below. One would listen to the conversation while the other watched what was going on and described what he saw to his companion.

In this way the boy got to know the building a great deal better than before. He learnt much more about its occupants' affairs and listened to many more of its conversations. He came out of his seclusion and began to live a much freer life. However, the most fruitful and interesting hours of his life after this friend's arrival were spent neither in his room nor in the block, but within the Azhar itself. The boy was able to rest in his room after the dawn lecture until it was time for the lecture on law. Thus he listened with his friend every morning to the stammering prayers of the sheikh with the obsession, which before that he had only been able to relish once a week, on Fridays.

When the time came for the lecture to begin he went off with his companion towards the Azhar by the route he used to take with his brother; only now they would talk excitedly or joke together all the way. They often avoided the filthy,

bat-ridden alley and went down Sharia Khan Ga'far, which was much cleaner but also brought them out into Sharia Sayyidna-l-Hussein. Another change was that, after his friend's arrival, the boy acquired a habit of never passing the Mosque of Sayyidna-l-Hussein, much less going inside, without saying a *Fātiha*. This custom, which he learnt from his friend, soon became ingrained. The years passed by and his mode of life changed, but he cannot recall ever passing this mosque without saying over to himself the hallowed words of the first chapter of the Koran.¹

For their meals the boy's brother allowed him and his companion an extremely small sum of money, with the right to claim his own ration of bread, consisting of four loaves, from the Hanafite section² every morning. They ate two of the loaves for lunch and kept the two others for supper. Though their money allowance was minute in the extreme—no more than one piastre a day—they learnt how to lay it out economically so as to enjoy a fair number of the delicacies they hankered after. Some days they even got up with the birds, passed through the narrow opening in the still locked door and picked their way towards the Azhar. On the road they would stop at a *balīla*³ shop and each take a large helping. They adored *balīla*, for they were used to eating quantities of it in the country. They loved the sugar which was poured over it to mix with the big grains and melt in the boiling broth. No sooner did it touch their lips than the last traces of sleep disappeared; a delicious warmth spread through their mouths and stomachs, and primed their whole bodies with energy. It was a splendid preparation for the law lecture. Now they could listen to what the sheikh was saying with a sense of well-being in body and mind alike.

Nor were they too poor to turn aside in Sharia Sayyidna-l-Hussein and sit down on the narrow wooden bench outside

¹ See note on p. 9. The *Fātiha* is said here as a prayer for the soul of Hussein, who was killed defending his claim to the Prophet's succession.

² There are twenty-six sections in the Azhar into which students pass according to their rite or place of origin. A section is strictly the space between two pillars, and might perhaps be rendered "house." The Hanafites, belonging to one of the four rites of orthodox Islam, have a section of their own. Another section, the Fashnite, caters for students from Middle Egypt, as will be seen in Chapter XVIII.

³ Boiled maize or wheat. A very sweet concoction, often eaten with milk or butter.

one of the foodshops. There might or might not be a strip of mat on the hard wood, but in any case it seemed to them as soft as down to sit on as they waited in blissful anticipation for bowls of soaked figs to be brought to them. They eagerly swallowed these and drank down the juice, then stayed quiet for a while chewing the raisins which were left at the bottom.

They even had enough money, on their way home in the morning or the afternoon, to stop at a sweetshop and indulge their harmless passion for *harissa* or *bassbússa*¹ without spoiling their appetite for lunch or supper.

Lunch was a simple affair. It meant going to one of the shops which sold boiled beans, and eating them with two of the four loaves. Two portions of *fool* cost two and a half milliemes; and they bought a bunch or two of leeks for half a millieme. The shopkeeper brought them a big bowl of soup with beans swimming in it and a little oil to taste. They dipped their bread in the soup and chased the beans out with it as best they could, using the other hand to help themselves to leeks. By the time they had finished the bread and the leeks they had had enough to eat, and in fact almost too much; but there was still some broth left in the bowl. The boy was ashamed to accept it at first, but when his cousin laughed at him for this and held out the bowl for him to finish he finally drank up the soup and gave the bowl back clean to the proprietor.

Thus their lunch cost them no more than three milliemes—not to mention what they had eaten before lectures began. It only remained for them to go back to the Azhar and fill their brains as they had filled their bellies. The boy was very careful never to miss his law and grammar lectures with the sheikh who was half-reformer and half-conservative, not only out of obedience to his brother but for his own personal satisfaction. But he was also extremely anxious to hear other lecturers and savour other subjects. This he could now do without any difficulty, thanks to the lectures which were given late in the morning when students came back from their lunch. The two friends determined to attend a lecture

¹ *Harissa* is a sweetmeat made with flour and butter. *Bassbússa* is a nut-cake of Syrian origin.

on El-Kafrâwy's *Commentary*¹ which was given every day at this time by a sheikh who had only just qualified, though he had been connected with the Azhar for a very long time. He was already quite old and had spent many years studying for his degree. When at last he achieved it he began in the usual way by reading El-Kafrâwy's *Commentary*.

The boy had heard a good deal of adverse criticism of this book both from his teachers and from his brother's friends. But the more they decried it the more interested he became. He could not be deterred from going to the first lecture and learning the nine ways of reciting "Bismillah ir-Rahmân ir-Rahîm," case-endings and all. In fact he quite fell in love with this branch of learning, and he and his companion became as regular attendants at this grammar lecture as they were at the other. Nevertheless he realised that it was at the other lecture that he learnt his grammar; here he only learnt to laugh. This new lecture was a genuine source of amusement, because of the unending inflexions which the commentator insisted on citing, and above all on account of the sheikh himself, who read the text and the commentary in an extraordinarily laughable voice. He did not so much read as sing it, and the sounds did not come up from his chest but down from his head. His voice combined two contradictory qualities; it was at once dull and rich, muffled and full.

He was an Upper Egyptian, from the furthest south, and had kept the dialect of his province without any modification either in speaking, recitation or chanting. He had a fiery temperament and whether he was reading, asking questions or answering objections his manner was uniformly harsh. He was easily provoked to anger, and to question him was to earn an insult. Anyone who persisted in an inquiry was liable to have his ears boxed if he was close up, or get a shoe thrown at him if he was sitting further away. The sheikh's shoe was as big as his voice was loud, and every bit as rough as his clothes—he did not wear an overcoat, but only a coarse cloak—and its sole was studded with nails to protect it against wear and tear. One can imagine, then, what it was like to be hit in the face, or anywhere else for that matter, by so formidable a shoe.

¹ See note on p. 71.

The result was that students were afraid to ask questions, and whether the sheikh was reading, explaining, criticising or chanting they never interrupted. So he never wasted either his own time or that of his students. He began the academic year with El-Kafrâwy's *Commentary* and before the end he had finished Sheikh Khâlid's book¹ as well. In this way his students read two books in a single year, while the other sheikhs' classes had looked at no more than one. As for our conservative-liberal, he with his tiny group of students had not gone beyond the first few chapters of the grammar.

All this had its influence on the boy's grammatical experience, if such an expression may be allowed. When he came back to Cairo after his summer holiday he found the conservative-liberal had gone. So he followed the normal course for an Azharite; in law he attended a lecture on Tâ'y's commentary on the *Kanz*,² and in grammar one on El-'Attar's notes to the commentary on *El-Azhariya*.³ But it is better not to anticipate events but to go back to the boy's first year.

After the late morning lesson he used to go off to the mid-day lecture and then return home with his cousin to read over the material for the next day's lectures, as all really serious students did, or to pick out passages from various books, whether he understood them or not. As the sun moved towards its setting the two friends turned their minds to supper, in a mood which varied from gloom to exaltation according to the amount of money they had left. If they still had half a piastre they would split it in two and buy with one quarter some *halâwa*⁴ and with the other a little Greek cheese. This made a really luxurious supper. They took a piece of cheese and a piece of *halâwa* together in one mouthful, and considered this strange combination extremely palatable. But if they had spent some of their money on *balîla* or figs then there would only be a quarter of a piastre left

¹ See note on p. 71.

² *Kanz el-Daqâ'iq* (*Treasury of Extracts*) is a Hanafite law-book by the thirteenth-century Persian jurist El-Nasâfy. Tâ'y lived in Egypt in the eighteenth century.

³ Short title for *The Azharite Introduction to Arabic Studies*. El-'Attar (1766-1834?) was Rector of the Azhar from 1828 until his death.

⁴ *Halâwa tihînîya* is a thick sticky sweet made of sesame paste, sugar, almond oil and almonds.

them. In this case they bought a little sesame paste¹ and poured on it some of the black or white honey which they had from the country. This would not be too rich a supper, but it might well have been worse.

Sometimes, however, what with *balîla* or figs or both of them together, they had spent all their money and had nothing left at all. No matter: they had kept the two loaves and there were two reserve tins in the room, one containing black honey and the other white. They would take some of this honey to dip the two loaves in, and make do with that instead of luxuries like *halâwa* and cheese and sesame paste. They even contrived to give a relish to these iron rations by dipping their bread alternately in the white honey and the black.

Now the sun was lowering towards the west and soon the muezzin would be climbing his minaret. The two boys must be off to the Azhar at once. Like the older students they attended a lecture after evening prayer. It was a course on logic, and the text used was El-Akhdary's *Sullam*.² The lecturer was a sheikh who considered himself learned, but whose title to learning the Azhar had never recognised. He went on studying year after year and persisted in trying for a degree, but without success. He never despaired, and was never satisfied with the examiners' verdict; so in the end they found him not only tedious but provoking. He bored them by his constant attendance at lectures and his annual re-appearance at the examination. But what really infuriated them was his practice of sitting down beside one of the columns after evening prayer, surrounded by a circle of students, and reading a book on logic to them just as if he were an eminent sheikh. For logic was a subject which only the most distinguished of the doctors would venture upon.

Certain it is that this student sheikh was remarkable neither for learning nor for teaching ability. His ignorance and incapacity were obvious even to these beginners. He too came from the furthest part of Upper Egypt, and his speech remained exactly as it had been before he came up

¹ Sesame paste, one of the ingredients of *halâwa*, is a sort of sticky flour consisting of the dregs of sesame oil.

² The *Stairway* is a treatise written in ninety-four verses, about the year 1534.

to the Azhar. Nothing was changed either in his way of talking or of reading. Moreover he was easily provoked and violent in his anger. Not that he ever insulted the students or knocked them about; he did not dare to intrude on the privileges of the genuine doctors, who acquired a licence to such things when they took their degrees.

All this might be true, and the two boys had been told about it by the others. But that did not prevent them from attending regularly at this lecture, so that they might be able to tell themselves that they were learning logic and visiting the Azhar between sunset and nightfall, just as the advanced students did.

The first year sped by like a flash and it seemed no time before the law and grammar courses were over. Soon the students would be saying goodbye and going off to spend the summer in their native towns and villages. Ah, how the boy had longed for this holiday, and how home-sick he had been for the country! But now that the holiday had actually arrived here he was hoping the journey would be put off so that he could stay in Cairo. Was he sincere in this attitude, or did he have other reasons for taking it? Yes and no.

He was sincere in that he loved Cairo and hated leaving it now that he knew it so well. Moreover he never liked travelling. But he also felt obliged to stay by the fact that his brother used to spend most of his holidays in Cairo and thus earned the approval of his people, who considered this a sign of the most praiseworthy diligence. The boy wished to do as his brother did, so as to be equally well thought of. But all this self-denial was of no use. One day he and his companion were packed off in a gharry with their clothes tied up in a pair of bundles. At the station they were provided with tickets and deposited in a crowded third-class carriage. The train moved off and had barely passed a couple of stations before they had forgotten all about Cairo and the Azhar and the building they lived in. They could only think of one thing, and that was the country with all its promise of happiness and delight.

XVI

IT was after nightfall when the two boys got off their train and found, to their great disappointment, that no one was waiting for them at the station. They went on home and found everything proceeding in its normal fashion.

The family had long left the supper-table and the boy's father, after saying his prayers for nightfall, had gone outside the house, according to his usual custom, to hold a conclave with his friends. The children were dozing off to sleep and one by one their small sister carried them away to bed. The boy's mother had lain down on a felt mattress under the stars and was resting there drowsily, half-asleep; while her daughters sat talking, as they did every evening, until their father should finish his short chat and return into the house. Then the whole family would go off to bed and the house would be wrapped in a silence broken only by the barking of dogs and the crowing of cocks either inside the house or on the fringes of the village.

The boys' arrival was a complete surprise to the family. There had been no warning of their return, so that no special supper had been prepared for them and they had not even been kept any of the ordinary supper. And no one had been sent to meet them at the station. So it was that the boy was disappointed of his fond anticipations, of his hope that he would be greeted in the same way as his elder brother, with a jubilant, eager welcome. True, his mother got up to kiss him, and his sisters each gave him a hug. But then the boy and his companion sat down to a supper no different from their usual meal in Cairo.

His father came in and, after giving him his hand to kiss, asked him how his elder brother was in Cairo. Soon the whole family went to bed. The boy slept in his old bed, with a heavy heart, biting back as best he could his anger and disappointment.

After that life at home and in the village went on just as

it had done before the boy went up to Cairo to study at the Azhar. It was as if he had never gone to Cairo or listened to the sheikhs or studied law and grammar and logic and tradition. He was obliged, just as before, to pay his humble respects to the schoolmaster, to kiss his hand whenever he met him and to listen as ever to his unceasing flow of nonsense. He even had to pay a visit now and again to the village school in order to kill time. The students treated him as they had always done before, and seemed scarcely aware that he had been away, much less interested in what he had seen or heard in Cairo. And yet he had so much to tell them if only they had asked.

The hardest thing of all was that not a single friend from the village called to ask after the young student, though he had been away for a whole academic year. All that happened was that one or two people met him and greeted him in lukewarm indifference: "Hallo! You here? Back from Cairo? How are you?" Then, raising their voices, they would add, in a tone of genuine concern, "And how did you leave your elder brother?"

This was enough to convince the boy that he was still what he had been before he left for Cairo, a creature of no importance whatsoever, undeserving either of attention or interest. This hurt his pride, which was considerable, and made him retire into himself more than ever, till he became stubbornly self-centred and even morose. He had barely been home for a few days, however, before people's opinion of him began to change. Their indifference turned not to sympathy or affection, but to the very opposite. So he had to put up with the same treatment from his neighbours in the village as he had had to endure formerly, and that day after day, without end or respite.

At last he could stand no more of it. He broke away in disgust from his old habits of submissiveness and rebelled against those to whom he had been used to show obedience. He was quite reasonable at first. But when his remarks were met by disapproval and opposition this made him take up an obstinate and exaggerated attitude of contradiction. One day he listened to a conversation between his mother and the schoolmaster. They were talking about traditions in religion

and theology, and the sheikh was commending the memorisers of the Koran, who know the sacred book by heart. His remarks annoyed the boy, who could not restrain himself from breaking in and calling all this "stuff and nonsense." The schoolmaster was furious and loaded him with insults. "All you've picked up in Cairo," said he, "is a bad character. You've thrown away your chances of acquiring a decent education."

His mother scolded him angrily and apologised for him to the schoolmaster. When his father returned for evening prayer and supper she told him of the incident. He merely shook his head and dismissed the whole affair with a sarcastic laugh. There was no love lost between him and the schoolmaster.

If the matter had ended there everything would have been all right. But one day our friend heard his father reading aloud from *Dalâ'il el-Khairât*,¹ as he usually did after morning or afternoon prayer. Whereupon the boy began to shrug his shoulders and shake his head from side to side, till finally he burst out laughing in front of his sisters. "To read *Dalâ'il el-Khairât*," said he, "is an idiotic waste of time."

His small brothers and sisters, of course, understood nothing of this and paid no attention to it. But his elder sister scolded him roughly and in so doing raised her voice high enough for her father to hear. He did not interrupt his reading, but as soon as he had finished he came up to the boy with a quiet smile on his face and asked him what it was he had said. So the boy repeated his remark. "What business is it of yours?" replied his father, with a shake of the head and a short, sardonic laugh. "Is that what you learnt at the Azhar?" "Yes, I did," retorted the boy, "and I also learnt that a great deal of what you read in this book is impious, and does more harm than good. Man must not seek the intercession of prophets and saints or believe that there can be mediators between God and men. That's idolatry."

The old man was furious, but managed to control his anger and keep on smiling. His reply made the whole family roar with laughter: "Be quiet, and may God cut off your

¹ Collection of rather ingenuous prayers by Ghazûly, a fifteenth-century mystic of North Africa.

tongue! Don't talk like this again, or I warn you I'll keep you here in the country, stop your career at the Azhar, and make you a Koran-reader for funerals and family gatherings." Then he turned on his heel and went off, amid a chorus of laughter from the family. But this reprimand, however harsh and galling, only served to increase the boy's obstinacy and wilfulness.

In a few hours the old man had forgotten the incident, and when he sat down to supper with his sons and daughters around him, as always, he started asking the boy about his elder brother in Cairo. What was he doing? What books was he reading? Whose lectures was he attending?

The sheikh took a keen delight in asking such questions, and listened intently to the replies. He liked to put them to the young sheikh himself when he came home. But the boy's brother was reluctant to answer the first time, and after that evaded his father's questions or gave perfunctory replies. His father took care not to protest against this reticence, though secretly he was very much hurt and complained to his wife about it when they were alone.

The boy, however, far from being reticent or unwilling to answer his father's questions, was as compliant as could be. He never became impatient, however many times his father repeated his questions or whatever subject he touched. So the old man used to love putting questions to him and chatting to him during lunch and supper; and now and again he would repeat to his friends the stories his son told him about the young sheikh's visits to the Imam or Sheikh Bakhît, or the objections he made to his teachers during lectures and the embarrassment he caused them; then their angry replies, and the insults or even blows that they rained upon him.

The boy was well aware of the pleasure his father took in these stories. So he told more and more of them and even invented some outright, though these he took care to remember so as to be able to tell his brother about them when he returned to Cairo.

All this made the old man blissfully happy and eager to hear more. So when the family sat down to supper that evening, and the sheikh repeated his question as to what his son in Cairo was doing and what books he was reading, the boy,

with a sly, mischievous air, replied: "He visits the tombs of the saints and spends his time reading *Dalâ'il el-Khairât*."

This reply was greeted by a roar of laughter from the whole family. The small children, who had their mouths full, almost choked themselves, and the old man himself laughed longer and louder than them all.

In this way the boy's rebuke to his father for reading *Dalâ'il el-Khairât* became a family joke for many years to come. Nevertheless it really hurt the old man's feelings, crossing as it did with his deepest habits and convictions. But the amusing thing was that despite this he actually encouraged his son to criticise him in this way, and took a perverse pleasure in being hurt.

At all events the boy's spirit of originality soon began to exercise itself elsewhere: at his father's confabulations outside the house, or at Sheikh Muhammad 'Abdul-Wâhid's shop; in the mosque where Sheikh Muhammad Abu Ahmad, chief *faqîh* of the town, taught boys and young men how to read the Koran, led worshippers in prayer on weekdays and on occasion gave lessons in theology; or in the circle which collected from time to time round Sheikh 'Atîya, the merchant, at the end of afternoon prayer. Sheikh 'Atîya was one of those merchants who have studied for several years at the Azhar and then returned to the country to occupy themselves with worldly affairs without abandoning the things of religion. He continued to teach and preach in the mosque, and sometimes gave readings from the traditions.

The boy even took his spirit of contradiction into the law-courts, where it became familiar to the judge, and still more so to the sheikh who was the judge's secretary. He saw that he knew a great deal more than this man about law, was more accomplished in theology and more reliable in his judgments. Only he had not yet acquired the scrap of paper called a doctor's degree, which is a necessary qualification for the office of judge and is much less often won by genuine hard work than by luck or flattery.

All these people became familiar with the boy's opinions. They knew that he disparaged most of their learning, scoffed at the miracles of the saints and disapproved of making saints and prophets intermediaries between man and God. This

boy, they told each other, is a misguided heretic who wants to make us heretics too. He has been up to Cairo to sit at the feet of Sheikh Muhammad 'Abdu and imbibe his dangerous and abominable opinions; and now he has come back to lead his townsfolk into error and perdition.

Sometimes one or two of them would come to the sheikh's gatherings outside the house and ask to be introduced to this eccentric son of his. So with a quiet smile the old man would go off into the house where the boy was playing or chatting with his sisters. Taking him gently by the hand he would lead him outside, present him to the company and sit him down amongst them. Then one of those present would start a discussion with the boy. The argument at first would be as suave as could be, but before long it would degenerate into naked wrangling. More often than not the boy's questioner would go off in a pent-up fury, calling upon God to forgive him his vile heresy and protect them all against the wiles of the devil.

The old man and those of his friends who had not been educated at the Azhar or made a study of theology were amazed and delighted at these disputes and thoroughly enjoyed the duels they witnessed between the young boy and those white-haired sheikhs.

The boy's father relished it all as much as any, though he by no means agreed with his son's views. He could never see any objection to the mediation of saints and prophets or doubt that saints were capable of performing miracles. But he loved to see his son engaged in these arguments and emerging victorious over his opponents. So he frankly took the boy's side. He used to listen attentively to the tales people told—and often made up—about this strange son of his. When he came back home in the afternoon or evening he would repeat them all to his wife, sometimes proudly and sometimes in anger.

Thus the wheel came full circle and the boy emerged from his obstinate isolation. Not only the village itself but the whole town was talking and thinking about him; and his situation in the family, his personal situation that is to say, changed altogether. His father no longer neglected him, his mother, brothers and sisters were no longer indifferent to

him, and his relations with them were no longer founded on pity and commiseration, but on something much better and much more gratifying to the boy.

Gone was the threat launched at the beginning of the holidays. There was no longer any question of his staying in the country, breaking off his career at the Azhar and becoming a *faqih* to recite the Koran at funerals and family gatherings. Up he rose one day at dawn, and the whole family with him. Soon he was clasped in his mother's arms as she kissed him goodbye and wept silently over him. And now he was at the station with his companion, and his father was gently helping him into the train, offering him his hand to kiss and then leaving him with a "God bless you" on his lips.

The two boys whiled away the journey with games, and soon enough they were getting off the train at Cairo station. There was the boy's brother waiting for them with a smile of welcome and calling a porter for their luggage, which was more food than anything else. As soon as they were through the station doorway he called for a cart and put the boy's friend on it with the provisions. Then he hailed a gharry, settled the boy gently in it and, sitting down on his right, gave the address of the tenement to the driver.

XVII

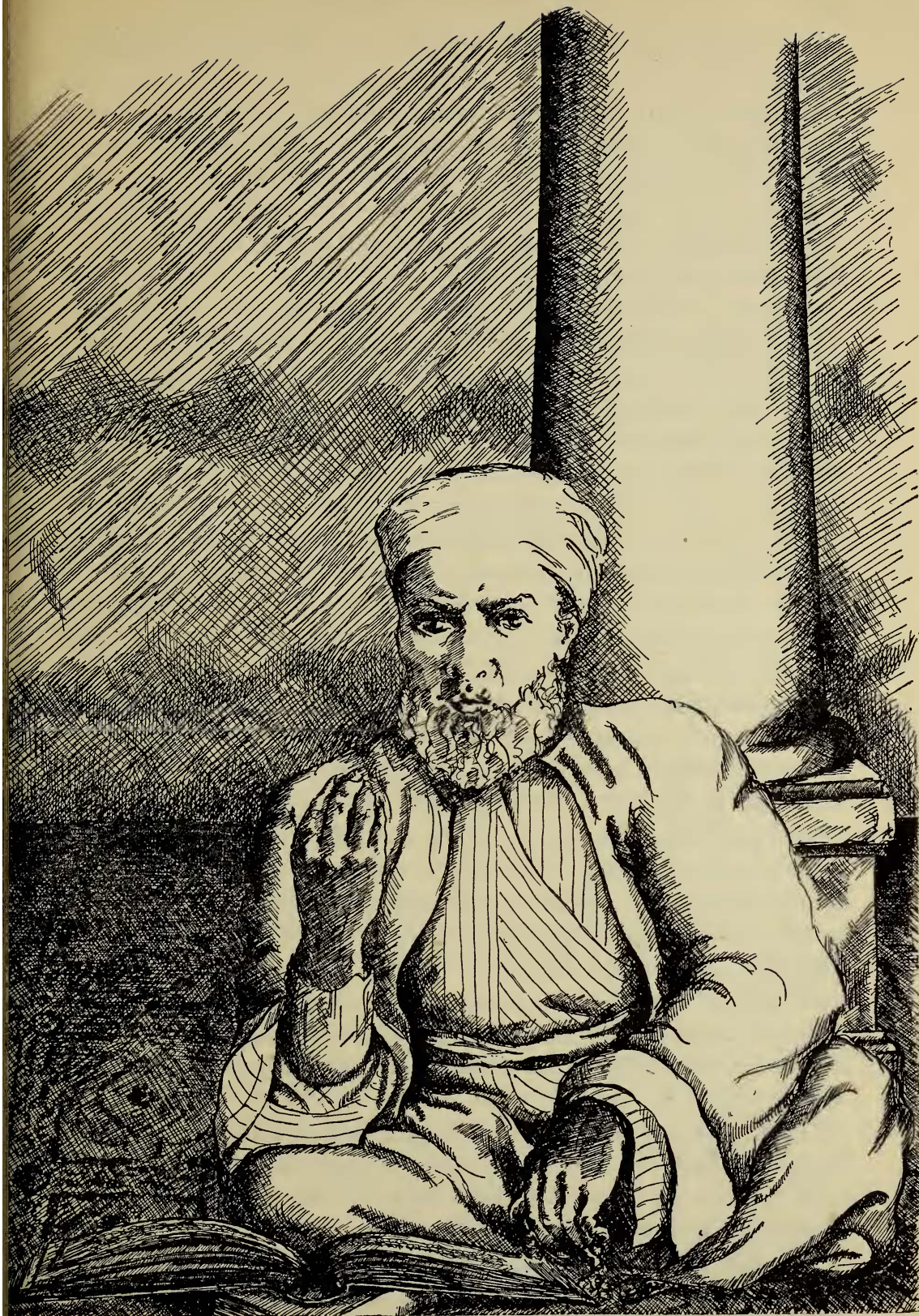
BACK again at his lectures in the Azhar and other mosques, the boy worked hard at law and grammar and logic. He was gaining proficiency in the *fankala*, the Azharite science of objections, which was highly prized by the best conservative students, jeered at by the radicals, but not neglected by the moderate reformers. In the morning he studied Tâ'y's commentary on the *Kanz*, at noon the *Azhariya*, and in the evening the commentary of Sayyid El-Jurjâny on the *Isagôgê*.¹ The first lecture was given in the Azhar, the second in the mosque of Muhammad Bey Abu-l-Dhahab, and the third in the mosque of Sheikh 'Adawy, by a descendant of the sheikh himself. He was often severely taxed by the mid-morning lecture, on the *Qatr el-Nadâ* of Ibn Hishâm,² which he read out of eagerness to advance quickly in grammar, so as to have done with the elementary books and proceed to the commentary of Ibn 'Aqil on the *Alfiya*.³ But he was not very regular at this lecture. He thought little of the sheikh's intelligence and found all he needed in the *fankala* of Sheikh 'Abdul-Magid el-Shazly on the *Azhariya* and 'Attar's commentary.⁴ His memories of these lectures on the *Azhariya* are ineffaceable; for it was then that he really learnt the *fankala*, above all from unending discussion of this sentence from his author: "The particle *qad* heralds the verb." The boy had studied thoroughly all the objections and riposts to which this innocent phrase had given rise. He wore down the sheikh with his questions and argumentation, until suddenly in the middle of the discussion silence fell, and in a strangely honeyed tone of voice which our friend can never recall without laughing, and at the same time pitying the man, "God

¹ Arabic adaptation of Porphyry's *Introduction* to the logical categories of Aristotle; one of the chief channels of Hellenistic influence on Islamic thought.

² Grammarian of Cairo, who lived 1309-90. The title means *The Dewdrop*.

³ Famous grammar of Ibn Malik, thirteenth-century philologist, written in one thousand verses (as indicated by the title). Ibn 'Aqil belongs to the following century.

⁴ See note on p. 82.



shall judge between us," said he, "on the Day of Resurrection."

He said it in a voice full of annoyance and disgust, yet rich with a genuine sympathy. Another sign of this was that when the lecture was over, and the boy went up to kiss his hand, as students used regularly to do, he put his other hand on the boy's shoulder and said in a quiet, affectionate voice: "Work hard and God will bless you."

These words of encouragement sent the boy back home with a light heart. He told the news to his brother, who waited till tea-time, and then when the whole company was there said teasingly to the boy, "Tell us the story of *qad* heralding the verb." At first the boy held back out of modesty, but the others egged him on, so he proceeded to repeat what he had heard and understood and the comments he had made. They all listened intently, and when he had finished the middle-aged student who was still waiting to get his degree stood up and kissed his forehead, with the words: "May He who slumbers not, the Living and Eternal God, be your refuge and strength."

At this the others burst out laughing. The young man, however, felt intensely pleased with himself and from that moment began to look upon himself as a full-blown scholar. He was confirmed in this opinion by the fact that his companions at the grammar lecture took notice of him and began to keep him behind after the lecture or come up to him beforehand with queries and suggestions that they should prepare their work together before noon. This was a flattering offer. So he abandoned the lecture on the *Qatr el-Nadâ* and took to studying with this group of students, who would read a passage aloud to him and then attempt to explain it. But he soon outstripped them in this and began to expound alone.

They did not challenge his explanations and would listen to no one but him. The effect of this was to inflate his pride still further and convince him that he was well on the way to becoming a sheikh.

His life that year followed the same course as before, without any important change, except that he made progress in his work equivalent to the effort he put into it, while his

sense of superiority over his contemporaries increased in direct proportion to the humility with which he regarded the older students in the tenement. He learnt a lot too about the lives of sheikhs and students at the Azhar by listening to what his companions and his brother's friends had to say about them.

There was not a single thing in all that he heard said to give him a good opinion of either lecturers or students, and the longer he listened the less he thought of either. It is true that now and again a good word was said for the intelligence of one of the sheikhs, either junior or senior. But innumerable were the reproaches poured upon old and young alike for every kind of failing in character, morals, and even competence. All of which aroused in the boy a flood of anger and contempt and disappointment.

Not a sheikh was free from such blemishes. One of them, for instance, bore a secret grudge against his contemporaries and was always slyly intriguing against them. To meet them he was all smiles, but the moment they had turned their backs he said the vilest things about them and played them the dirtiest tricks. Another sheikh's religion was a fraud. He made a show of piety when he was in the Azhar or amongst his colleagues, but when he was by himself or with his evil geniuses he descended to the very depths of vice.

Sometimes the scandalmongers even named these evil geniuses of his. The older students, too, used to wag their tongues about this or that sheikh who was over-interested in some young man or other, was always glancing in his direction or couldn't stay still in his chair when his favourite was in the class.

The most disgraceful of the crimes laid at their door were backbiting and defamation. The students used to relate how this or that sheikh had denounced his best friend to the Rector or the Mufti. The Rector, they said, would listen to informers, but the Mufti¹ refused to hear a word and dismissed them with the harshest of reproaches.

On one occasion the older students told the following story about a group of senior sheikhs, whose names they gave. These sheikhs, they declared, realised that their scurrility

¹ Elsewhere attended to as the Imam. See introduction.

had gone too far and became ashamed of themselves. They remembered the words of the Koran: *Speak nō evil of each other. Which of you would wish to eat his brother's flesh after he were dead? Would it not revolt you?* So they determined to avoid this heinous sin and agreed that whoever first fell should pay the others twenty piastres.

For a day or two they managed to keep away from scandal-mongering, out of unwillingness to pay the fine. But it was no good. As they were talking together one day a certain sheikh came up, passed the time of day and continued on his way. He was scarcely out of sight before one of them took a piece of silver out of his pocket, handed it to his companions, and began to slate the fellow right and left.

The students, young and old alike, never stopped jeering at the stupidity of their teachers and their proneness to ridiculous mistakes both in comprehension and in reading. The result of this was that our friend acquired a poor opinion of both sheikhs and students in general. He saw that the best thing he could do was to concentrate on his work and acquire as much knowledge as he could, irrespective of the sources from which it was derived.

His contempt increased at the beginning of his third year at the Azhar, when he searched for a lecturer in law with whom to read the commentary of Mulla Miskîn¹ on the *Kanz*. He was recommended to a famous teacher, a man of great reputation and a high position in the courts. He duly joined his lecture-circle, but had scarcely spent five minutes there before being overcome by the most acute embarrassment and finding himself hard put to it to control his laughter. The reason was that the sheikh (God rest his soul) was subject to an extraordinary mannerism. He could never read a sentence in the book, or give his own interpretation of it, without repeating this phrase twice over: "He says, says he: well, what does he say?" And this occurred several times every few minutes. So much so that it cost our friend tremendous efforts to prevent himself laughing, which disgusted him with the whole affair. He did succeed in controlling himself, but found it impossible to attend this lecture more than three times, for so far from benefiting him it wore

¹ Sixteenth-century jurist. For the *Kanz*, see note on p. 82.

him out. He had great difficulty in suppressing his mirth, and found the effort a greater strain than he could bear. So he looked round for another lecturer on this particular book, and failed to find a single one who was not afflicted with some mannerism or other such as stirred his amusement to a point where he expended so much energy in mastering it that he had none left to listen with. At this juncture he was told that the book was not very important as law-books went. There was an excellent teacher, they said, who was reading the *Dourar*.¹ They gave the boy his name and recommended him as a first-rate scholar and an accomplished judge. His, they declared, were the lectures to attend.

He asked advice of his brother and his brother's friends, who, far from dissuading him, gave him every encouragement. At the first lecture our friend was delighted with his new teacher, for he was not addicted to any peculiar phrase, expression or tone of voice. There were no tiresome repetitions in his reading or exposition. His wits and his legal competence were unimpeachable, and there was no doubt whatsoever about his mastery of the subject.

He was a tall, slender fellow with an agreeable voice and elegant carriage, charming to meet or talk with. He was well known for his modernist tendencies, not so much in ideas or opinions as in behaviour. The older students used to say that after delivering his lecture in the morning he would go on to the court, give judgment there, and return home to eat and sleep. Then in the evening he would sally forth with his cronies to haunts ill-suited to a learned doctor, where he listened to improper songs and tasted pleasures which no sheikh should know.

Here they mentioned the *Thousand & One Nights*. This surprised the boy. He knew the *Thousand & One Nights* only as the title of a most delightful book. But what they meant by the words was something quite different: a place of venal pleasures, a music and amusement hall.

When the boy first heard this gossip about his teacher he refused to believe it. But barely had he spent a fortnight with

¹ *Dourar el-Hukkâm*—*Pearls of the Rulers*—a celebrated work on the foundations of practical law by Molla Khosrew, a fifteenth-century Turkish jurist.

the sheikh before he became aware of a slackening in his preparation for the lecture. His exposition of the text became perfunctory, and questions from students embarrassed him. Worse still, when the boy asked him one day to explain something he had been saying his only reply was an insult. And as a rule this sheikh was the last person to descend to abuse; he was far too proud.

When the boy told his brother and the others what he thought about this sheikh they were shocked and at the same time sorry for him. One of them murmured something about the incompatibility of learning with late hours at the *Thousand & One Nights*.

The boy had better luck at grammar than at law. He went to lectures on the *Qatr-el-Nadâ* and the *Shudhûr*¹ by Sheikh 'Abdullah Dirâz (God rest his soul), a man whose charm and sweetness of voice were only equalled by his mastery of the subject and his ingenuity in exercising the students in its tricky points. All of which encouraged the boy enormously in his taste for grammar.

Such luck could not hold. At the beginning of the new academic year the boy started attending Sheikh 'Abdullah Dirâz' lectures on the *Commentary* of Ibn 'Aqil. But in the middle of the course, when everything was going splendidly, out came an order for the sheikh's transfer to the Alexandria Institute.

Both the sheikh and his students did all they could to get it reversed, but the Rector would listen to neither. There was no help for it; he would have to comply. Never will our friend forget the day when, with tears in his eyes, the teacher bade farewell to his pupils. They were weeping as unfeignedly as he, and with tears they took him to the gate of the mosque.

The sheikh's place was taken by another, who was blind. He was celebrated for his penetrating intelligence and distinction of style; and he was never mentioned in conversation without being commended for these qualities.

Along came this sheikh and took up the course at the point where Sheikh 'Abdullah Dirâz had left off. Sheikh 'Abdullah's

¹ Two advanced philological works by the Cairene Ibn Hishâm, regularly read at the Azhar. See p. 92.

audience had been large enough to fill his allotted space in the mosque of Muhammad Bey Abu-l-Dhahab. But when the blind sheikh took over the circle grew bigger and bigger, until there was no space left at all. The students were delighted with his first lecture, though they missed their old teacher's sweet voice and genial temper. But at the second and third lectures they were disgusted to find him vain and self-satisfied, over-confident in his own ideas, and intolerant of interruptions.

At the beginning of his fourth lecture an incident occurred which put the young man off grammar lectures for good. The sheikh quoted a verse of Ta'abbata Sharran,¹ and gave an explanation which the boy found altogether meaningless. He met our friend's objections with mere abuse, and when he persisted burst out, after a moment of silence: "Away with you! I cannot continue my lecture with a puppy like this in the class!"²

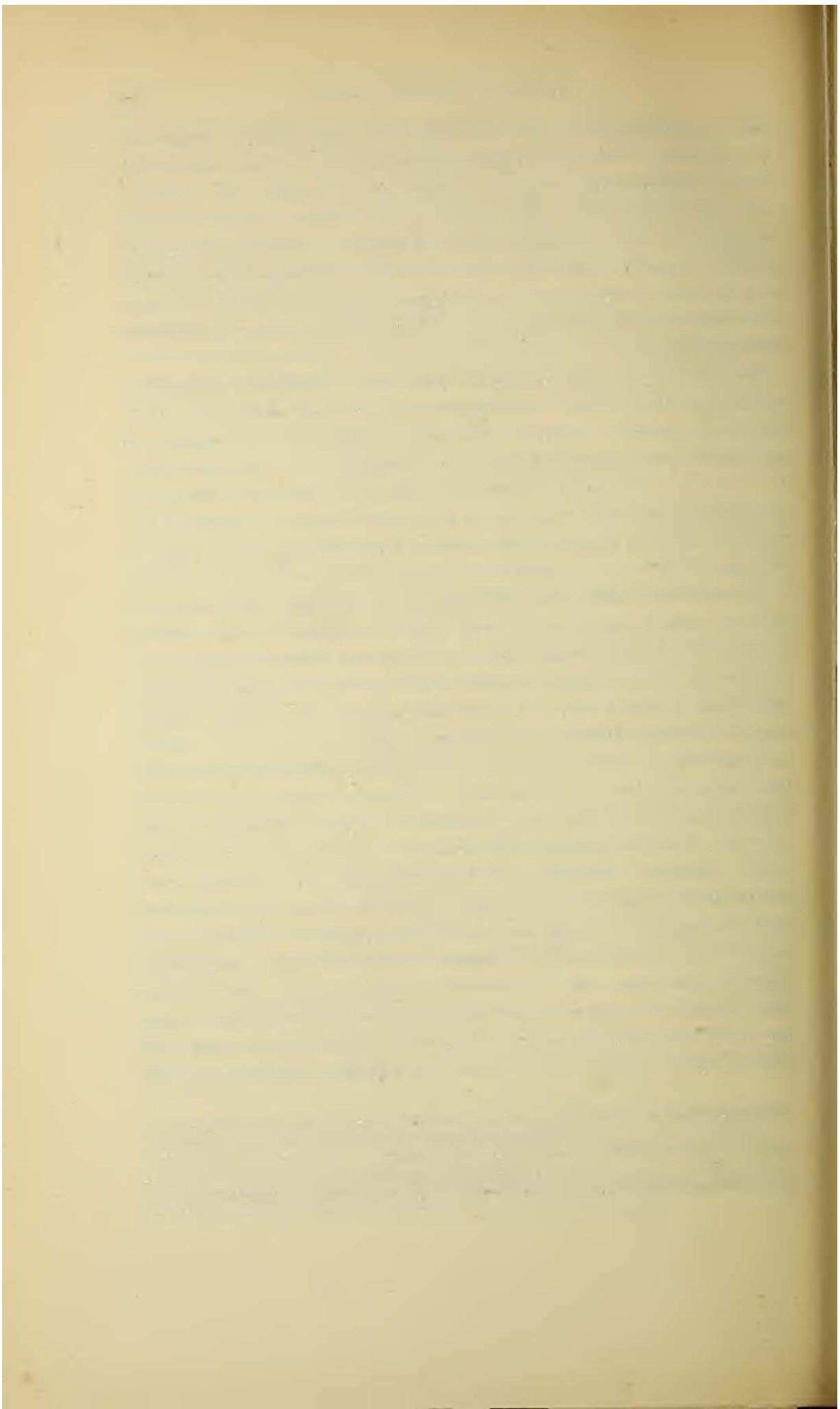
With these words the sheikh rose to his feet. The boy too got up, and would have been badly handled by the others if his Upper Egyptian comrades had not protected him by forming a ring and brandishing their shoes menacingly at them till they ran away. What Azharite of that time has never run away from an Upper Egyptian shoe?

That was the last grammar lecture the boy ever attended. But no: he went the next day to a lecture given by a celebrated sheikh of Sharqiya province on El-Ashmûny's *Commentary*,³ but he did not hear it out to the end. In the course of the sheikh's reading and interpretation the young man asked him a question on some point or other. Finding the reply unsatisfactory he repeated the question. This so enraged the sheikh that he ordered him to leave the circle. Whereupon some of his friends tried to calm the sheikh down; but this only angered him the more. He refused to go on with the lecture until this young jackanapes and his friends cleared off. There was nothing for it but to go, for

¹ Brigand-poet of pre-Islamic Arabia, a sort of Robin Hood of the desert.

² The description of this incident has had to be cut down, as the grammatical point at issue cannot be brought out in translation.

³ El-Ashmûny was a teacher at the Azhar in the nineteenth century. The book is an advanced grammatical commentary on the text of the *Alfiya* (see note on p. 92).



sheikh had a loud voice and still kept a perfect Upper Egyptian accent. He was extremely lively and given to vivacious gestures. To any student who interrupted him his manner was crushing. If you pressed the question he would turn on you in a fury: "Silence, you scamp, you scallywag!" And as he said it he hissed out the *s*'s and *c*'s in either word with all the force his tongue could put into them.

Everything went well, however, between lecturer and students until they had finished the section on *Concepts*. When they came to the second chapter, on *Propositions*, a terrible clash occurred between the young man and his teacher, which compelled him the next day to choose a place well away at the back. He came later and later every day to find a seat, until at last he found himself by the door of the dome. Then one evening he went out and never came through it again.

This clash between the young sheikh and himself he could never recall without bursting out laughing and making his brother and the whole crowd rock with laughter too. The sheikh had sat down on his chair and begun his reading with the words "The Second Chapter, of Propositions," rolling the *r*'s and stressing the vowels, but without exaggeration. Then he repeated the same words, rolling the *r*'s as before, but lingering immoderately over the vowels. Then he started a third time in the same drawl as before, but instead of saying "Propositions" he said "The Second Chapter, of—— who?" No one answered. So he answered for himself: "Of Propositions." Then he repeated the words again in the same ungrammatical form and when he came to the word "Who?" and no one answered him he slapped the boy across the forehead, crying "Answer, you sheep! Answer, you scallywags! Answer, you sons of swine!" He hissed out the *s*'s with all the force his tongue could muster, and one roar came back from the students: "Of Propositions!"

The whole affair tired the boy out, for it was extremely ridiculous, yet he was afraid to laugh right in front of the lecturer. At the same time he resented bitterly the blows which his teacher rained upon him. In any case he abandoned this lecture soon after without going further than the chapter on *Judgments*.

As he left this course in the middle of the year he decided instead to attend a theology lecture by a new sheikh who had just won his doctor's degree. His friends among the senior students talked of him as a man more charming than intelligent, with a pleasant voice and an excellent delivery. But his learning only flattered to deceive. In conversation or at first hearing he was impressive, but a closer acquaintance revealed his emptyheadedness. He was reading the commentary to Dardîry's *Kharîda*.¹ The boy listened to one lecture, admired his charming voice and splendid delivery, and expected to be impressed by his learning and his *fankala*. But unfortunately the sheikh's lecture-course was broken off. He was transferred to a provincial town a long way from Cairo to take up a seat on the judges' bench. So the boy had no chance to test his learning or come to any conclusion about him at all, except that he was capable and full of charm, had an attractive voice and was pleasant to talk to.

In fact, what with all these misfortunes, the boy had spent a whole year in acquiring practically nothing new in the way of learning, except by his own reading or by listening to the senior students in the tenement as they went through their books or debated points together.

When he came back to the Azhar the next year his sense of frustration returned and his conscience pricked him. How was he to plan his life? He couldn't stay in the country, for what would he do there? Yet there seemed no sense in staying in Cairo and attending lectures like these.

It was at this juncture that he turned to lectures on literature. But this is not the point at which to speak of his literary studies. As Buthaina says, to soothe her impatience for Jamîl,² "Love's hour is not yet ripe."

¹ Dardîry was a mystical writer who taught at the Azhar in the nineteenth century. He wrote a commentary to his own book whose title means "The Maiden."

² Jamîl was a sort of Arab troubadour who lived at the end of the seventh century, and was famous for his platonic love for Buthaina, whom he did not marry, but served as champion and distant admirer.

XVIII

IN fact the boy's attendance at literary lectures did not turn him away all at once from the Azharite sciences. He thought himself capable of reconciling in his own mind these two departments of knowledge. He had not been sent to Cairo or enrolled at the Azhar in order to become a writer either of prose or of verse, but to follow the full Azharite course until he could take the examination and earn his doctor's degree, then sit with his back to one of the columns of that venerable mosque with the students forming a circle around him to hear his lectures on law or grammar, or maybe both.

Such was his father's dream for him, as he told the family with a mixture of hope and pride in this odd, eccentric son of his. It was his brother's wish, too, and his own. What other ambition could he have but this? To blind people like him who want to live a tolerable life there are only two courses open: either to study at the Azhar until they win their degree and are assured of a livelihood from the daily allowance of loaves and the monthly pension of no more than 75 piastres in the case of a third-class degree, 100 for a second-class, and 150 for a first; or alternatively to make a trade of Koran-reading at funerals and in private houses, as his father once threatened he must do.

The young man had no choice, then, but to pursue his course of life at the Azhar to its due conclusion. When a student had spent three or four years at the Azhar his life began to split into two separate branches. One was academic, and consisted in attending lectures and passing through the various stages of the course; on this the young man was proceeding. He had begun it with passionate hopes; then his enthusiasm began to wane, and finally, in his disillusionment with the sheikhs and their teaching, he turned away from it in contempt.

The other branch had a more material aspect and consisted of three stages: matriculation, probation and candi-

dature. The stage of matriculation was the first stage of a student's life at the Azhar after his enrolment on the registers. This meant gaining admission to one of the sections; and our friend, like his brother, was enrolled with the Fashnites.¹ Probation was the second stage, to which the student was promoted, after spending some years at the Azhar, by presentation of a letter to the head of the section specifying the number of years he had spent at the Azhar and what lectures he had attended. These statements must be certified as correct by two of the sheikhs who had taught him. He must ask the head of the section to inscribe his name on the list of probationers so that when a place fell vacant among the candidates for allowances he might be admitted to it and qualify for the ration of two, three or four loaves, according to which section it was.

Thus our friend had to get himself accepted as a probationer. He wrote the necessary letter, and wound up with the cliché then in fashion: "May God make you the refuge of the powerless." Two sheikhs testified that the petition contained the truth and nothing but the truth. Then he took the letter to the sheikh's house, presented it to him, after kissing his hand, and departed. Thus he became a probationer. And a long probation it was; in fact he never qualified for the allowance in this section at all. Nevertheless his promotion to the rank of probationer gratified his father and made him as proud as could be.

While he was studying with more or less profit as a probationer, the Imam retired from Azhar as the result of a celebrated incident, after the Khedive had delivered his famous speech before some of the learned sheikhs.²

The young man imagined that the Imam's pupils, of whom a large number crowded every evening into the Porch of 'Abbas, would start a movement which would make it clear to the Khedive that the youth of the Azhar were affronted and

¹ Fashn is a Nile-side village, some one hundred miles south of Cairo, near which the author's family lived at this time. For the "sections," see n. 2 on p. 79.

² Towards the end of 1904 the Khedive 'Abbas Hilmy summoned a number of sheikhs to the Palace and proceeded to denounce the modernist group in the Azhar, and above all, of course, the Imam himself, whose Anglophil liberalism he mistrusted. The movement of reaction thus initiated was only momentarily successful.

intended to devote not only their time but also their hearts to the defence of their Rector.

Nothing of the kind. The Imam left the Azhar and took a house for his work as Mufti.¹ His students secretly sympathised with him, but kept their thoughts to themselves. A few of them visited him at this house at 'Ein Shams, but the majority deserted him; and that was the conclusion of the whole affair. As for the young man, his heart was full of shame and anger and contempt for sheikhs and students alike, though he had never known the Imam or been introduced to him.

A little later the Imam died, and his death caused a great stir throughout Egypt. But Azharite circles were less affected than any by this tragic event. The Imam's pupils were sorry, and perhaps some of them shed a few tears, but after the summer vacation they returned to their studies as if the Imam had not died, or indeed had never lived, except that now and again his own special pupils spoke of him regretfully.

So the young man learnt by bitter experience for the first time in his short life that all the respect and adulation paid to great men and all the flattery and attention they receive are mere useless words, and that man's fidelity resolves itself in most cases into empty rhetoric.

The young man's disillusion with humanity was intensified by his discovery that certain circles seized the occasion of the Imam's death to make money out of his name and exploit their acquaintance with him by writing about him either in prose or verse, and above all by publishing notices about him in newspapers and magazines.

But the boy noticed something else which increased his aversion to the Azhar and his contempt for both sheikhs and students. He found that the men who mourned sincerely for the Imam did not wear turbans, but tarboushes,² and he conceived a secret inclination towards them and a desire to make some acquaintance with their society. But how was such a thing possible for a blind boy condemned without escape to the Azhar and its circle?

¹ Supreme official interpreter (for Egypt) of the canon law of Islam. The Imam had been Mufti since 1899, and on leaving the Azhar kept the post, which had never before been held by anyone outside the Azhar. He accordingly had to find an office from which to work.

² Belonged, that is to say, to the lay intelligentsia.

Now the Imam had been the head of the Hanafite section, and when he left the Azhar, or rather when he died, his successor as Mufti also succeeded him as head of the section.

The son of the new Mufti was one of our friend's teachers and had lectured to him in his boyhood on the commentary of El-Sayyid Jurjâny on the *Isagôgê*. He was also his father's deputy as head of the Hanafite section, in which our friend was being strongly urged to enrol himself as probationer. The rations in this section were easier to get and ampler than in any other. In the Imam's days enrolment in the Hanafite section had not been at all easy and admittance was by examination only. The new Mufti maintained this rule, and it was his son who examined applicants for enrolment at a stage of the year determined by himself. "Why don't you enrol yourself in this section?" the young man was asked. "Your brother and his brilliant friends have been members for a long time, since the days of the Imam, and they draw a ration of four loaves a day each." So at the urgent instigation of his brother and the rest he presented himself one evening with the necessary letter at the examiner's house. He was shown in, and the sheikh greeted him, took the letter and looked it over, then tossed the young man a question, which he answered perhaps rightly and perhaps wrongly—he does not remember which. At all events the sheikh replied "That's excellent, you may go." So off he went, pleased as punch; and before long he was a full-blown candidate, receiving two loaves a day. So there was plenty of bread in the flat, and the family was overjoyed.

The bread ration was not the only advantage he gained. He was also given a cupboard in the section, which he prized much more. Now, when he entered the Azhar in the morning, he could go straight to his cupboard and put his shoes in it, with one or both of the loaves, and then pass the day quite free of anxiety about the shoes, which it used to cost him a great deal of effort to preserve from thieves and marauders. An immense number of shoes used to be stolen at the Azhar, and innumerable were the notices posted on the walls round the court announcing the loss of a pair of shoes and calling upon the person who had got hold of them to return them to their owner at such and such a place, or in such and such

a section, with the promise of a reward and threats of expulsion to anyone who kept them unlawfully.

So the young man was much better pleased with his cupboard and the two loaves than with the lectures he attended or the progress he made with his work. Nevertheless he forced himself to attend a theology lecture given just after dawn by Sheikh Râdy (God rest his soul) on the *Maqâsid*.¹ In the mid-morning he studied law with Sheikh Bakhît, who read the *Hidaya*,² and at noon he went to a rhetoric lecture by Sheikh 'Abdul-Hakam 'Atâ on the *Commentary*³ of El-Taftazâny.

The law lecture was, if nothing else, a great source of entertainment. First there were the songs which the sheikh used to sing whenever the students gave him the opportunity; then the sharpness of wit—distinctively Azharite—with which he dealt with students who interrupted his singing or questioned him about something he had been saying or reading. Sometimes, too, when he was in a good humour and felt the urge for it, he would recite some of his own verses. The young man memorised one of his lines and will never forget the rolling tones in which he chanted it:

*The turban on his head was like a net
Stretched on a camel's load of straw.*

When the boy repeated this verse to his brother and the rest they laughed heartily, and kept reminding each other of it and reciting it aloud. Then there was another verse, no less odd and amusing, which was the start of an elegy on one of the learned sheikhs:

*Ah! worst of woes, after your death, O Prophet,
Is the death of holy men like this Moroccan.*

Many years later another verse of this sheikh's was on the lips of Egyptians everywhere, and has not yet been forgotten by the best of them. In fact it has become proverbial:⁴

¹ Text-book of metaphysics and theology written at Samarkand by El-Taftazâny in the fourteenth century. The title means *Ends* or *Aims*.

² *The Way of Religion*, a celebrated text-book of Hanafite law by Marghinâny twelfth-century Persian.

³ This work takes the form of a commentary on the abridgement of a twelfth-century manual of rhetoric, *Talkhîs el-Miftâh* (see note on p. 53).

⁴ Proverbial, that is, of trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. The verse was written in 1921, when the Egyptian nationalist movement was at its height. The Wafd is the great nationalist and popular party in Egypt, which "the Princes and the Ministers" were at that time doing their best to resist. No heart could be firm in support of both.

*We are at one with the Princes and the Ministers and
the Wafd,*

And our hearts are firm in its support.

The young man often engaged in lengthy discussions with this sheikh. Once he carried it too far and went on arguing after the end of the period, until the students began shouting out from the sides of the mosque of Sayyidna-l-Hussein: "Enough! There'll be no beans left!" But the sheikh replied in that pleasant chant of his: "Not a bit of it! We won't adjourn until we've convinced this lunatic." So the lunatic had no choice but to be convinced. He too was anxious to secure some beans before they ran out.

The rhetoric lecture was the one he appreciated most. But not for anything he learnt from it, for the time was long past when he had gone to lectures at the Azhar in the hope of learning anything. He went merely to comply with the regulations, to pass the time and to look for entertainment. This last he found above all at the rhetoric lecture, because the sheikh—God bless him—had a fluent wit and was willing and conscientious in his work for the students. In fact he gave himself endless trouble to understand the subject and to pass on his knowledge to them. From time to time, when the effort became too much for him, he used to give himself a respite by asking the students in a humorous tone of voice, with the twang of Minia, "Sirs, do you follow me?"

At half-time he used to take pity on himself and the students and interrupt his reading or exposition for a few minutes, during which not a word passed his lips. Instead he took out his snuff and with meticulous gravity inhaled as large a pinch of it as he could. The students took advantage of this interval to assuage the burning thirst that had been generated within them by their leeks and beans and bean-cakes.¹ They bought glasses of sherbet from the pedlars who came round to them during lectures and attracted their attention by the tinkle of glasses delicately knocked together.

It was in one of these intervals that a grave event occurred. The young man lay resting with some of his friends, while the sheikh took his snuff and the students their drinks.

¹ *Ta'miya*, a popular delicacy, made of mashed *fool* fried in oil.

Then up came one of the ushers to the young man and his two friends and politely summoned them to the Rector's room.

But the moment has not yet come to tell this story, and in any case it has long been public.¹ The young man and his two friends left the lecture and never came back.

It was about this time that the young man became involved in an affair which he saw through to a finish, though it killed in him all hope of attaining success at the Azhar.

The Palace had conceived a grudge against an influential sheikh at the Azhar and prohibited him from giving lectures. This was generally regarded not only as an injustice to the sheikh but as a derogation from the rights of the Azhar. Yet nothing was done to repair it, and no one was more apathetic and submissive than the Azharites themselves. However, one of the young man's companions, who in later years took many a popular stand, came to him one day and said: "Do you realise how unjustly our sheikh has been treated?" "Of course," said the young man, "injustice isn't the word." "Would you take part in a demonstration against it?" "Certainly, but how can that be done?" "We will get together a few of our friends," said the other, "who used to attend the sheikh's lectures with us, then go and entreat him to continue his course of lectures with us in his house. If he agrees we shall not only get the advantage of his teaching but also, by publishing a notice of it in the press, we shall show the oppressors of the Azhar that there are some of us who are disgusted at their crimes and are not prepared to submit to them." The young man heartily agreed.

So a few of the sheikh's students got together and went to tell him of their plan, to which he consented. Then they announced in the press that he was to read with them the *Sullam el-'Ulûm fil-Mantiq* and the *Musallam el-Thubût fil-Usûl*, devoting half the week to each book.

So the sheikh began lecturing in his own house, and the students, as soon as they heard about it, flocked to hear him.

¹ It is eventually told in Chapter XIX.

² *The Stairway of Learning in Logic* and *Acknowledged Authority in Basic Law* are both by Bihâry, an Indian Arabist of the later seventeenth century.

The young men congratulated themselves on their audacity, and our friend regained a glimmering of hope.

But one day he started an argument with the sheikh about some remark he had let fall. The discussion was lengthy, and in the end the sheikh lost his temper and retorted sarcastically: "Silence, lad. What can a blind boy know about such things?" At this the young man was cut to the quick, but the sheikh mercilessly went on: "No amount of chatter can make a truth false, or an error true." A moment of grim silence followed. Then he added: "Go away, all of you. That's enough for today."

From that day the young man never went to another of these lectures and ceased to care about the sheikh in the slightest.

So it was that his despair over the Azhar returned. The only hope left him was his lecture course on literature. The time has now come to speak of this course and the far-reaching influence it had on his life.

XIX

FROM the time of his first arrival in Cairo literature and men of letters had been as frequent a topic of conversation as theology and the learned sheikhs. The older students in their discussions about literature mentioned a certain Sheikh El-Shinqîty (God rest his soul) as a friend and protégé of the Imam. This outlandish name made an odd impression on the boy; and odder still were the tales he heard of the eccentric ways and unconventional ideas which made this sheikh a laughing-stock to some and a bugbear to others.

These older students used to declare that they had never known anyone to rival Sheikh El-Shinqîty's capacity for memorisation and for reciting traditions by heart with text and authorities complete. They spoke of his incalculable temper, which would flare up at a moment's notice, and his incredible fluency of tongue. They even nicknamed him "The Passionate Moroccan." They talked of his having lived in Medîna and visited Istanbûl and Spain; and they quoted poems of his on these experiences. They told of the wealth of manuscripts he possessed, together with printed books not only from Egypt but from Europe; despite which he spent most of his time reading or copying in the National Library. Then they roared with laughter over a famous incident which brought him considerable notoriety and in the end did him a great deal of harm. It arose from his theory that the name '*Omar*, contrary to normal doctrine, is fully declinable.¹

The first time the boy heard this story he understood nothing whatsoever. But it all became perfectly clear to him after he had made progress in grammar and learnt the difference between indeclinable and partially or fully declinable nouns. This was the story as the young men told it: Sheikh Shinqîty used to engage in epic controversies with various groups of doctors over the declension of '*Omar*. Once in par-

¹ In Arabic names on certain measures have only two forms, instead of the usual three.

ticular they had assembled under the presidency of the Rector, and requested Sheikh Shinqîty to expound his theory on the declension of the word 'Omar. The sheikh, in his gruff Morroccan accent, replied: "That I won't do until you sit as students before your master, at my feet." At this the doctors were taken aback; till one of them, sharper than the rest, got up from amongst them, walked forward, and sat down cross-legged at the sheikh's feet. Whereupon Shinqîty began to expound. "Khalîl,"¹ said he, "quotes this line:

*You who disparage 'Omar
Have told imaginary tales of him."*

But the sheikh sitting at his feet broke in with his sly, reedy voice: "I met Khalîl yesterday and he quoted the verse to me differently; he didn't decline 'Omar as you do." But Shinqîty cut him off short: "Liar!" he said. "Khalîl died centuries ago, and how can anyone talk to the dead?" Then he called upon the doctors to brand his opponent as a liar who knew nothing either of prosody or grammar. But this appeal was met with a burst of laughter; and the assembly dispersed without deciding whether 'Omar was a diptote, as the grammarians say, or a triptote, as this particular sheikh maintained. As for the boy, he listened carefully to this anecdote and stored it up in his memory. He was highly amused by what he understood of it and curious about the rest.

The sheikh was reading with his students the poems known as the *Mu'allaqât*.² The boy's brother and some of his friends used to attend this lecture on Thursday or Friday every week and go over the text beforehand as they did for other lectures. So it was that the boy heard for the first time:

*Halt both, and let us mourn for my beloved and her
house
On the sand-dunes' edge between Haumal and Dukhûl.*³

But alas, it was only too soon that these seniors abandoned a course so difficult to digest. The boy's brother made an

¹ Khalîl, in Basra in the eighth century, first worked out the rules of Arabic prosody, and compiled a dictionary.

² The acknowledged masterpieces of Arabic poetry, written in the sixth century, before the age of Islam.

³ This is the beginning of the first *Mu'allaqa*, by Imru'ul-Qaïs. The second is by Tarafa (see below).

effort to memorise the *Mu'allaqât*, and got as far as Imru'ul-Qaïs'e and Tarafa's poems, which he repeated aloud, so that the boy could not help learning them too. Unfortunately he went no further than this before deserting the course for another which was more conventional. But those two poems remained graven on the boy's memory, though he had very little idea of what they meant.

The seniors talked of another lecture being given in the Azhar, on the art of composition, by a Syrian sheikh who was a close friend of the Imam. They attended it for a time, and even bought notebooks in which they wrote essays on various subjects, though after a while they left this lecture just as they had left the other. The boy's brother came home one day with the *Maqâmât* of Harîry,¹ and began to learn some of them by heart, repeating them aloud as before, so that the boy also learnt. But they had only reached the tenth *Maqâma* when the young sheikh left this lecture, as he had left the poetry and composition lectures before, to concentrate on law and theology and first principles.

Another time he came home with a thick book entitled *Nahg el-Balâgha* containing the speeches of the Caliph 'Aly,² with a commentary by the Imam himself. He began memorising some of these speeches, the boy again learning with him, but it was not long before he tired of this book too, so that the boy only learnt quite a few of them.

It was the same story with the *Maqâmât* of Badî' Ez-Zamân El-Hamazani. But about this time the boy learnt one verse of Abu Firâs³ which he can never forget:

*I see in you self-mastery to staunch your tears,
But has passion no power over you, to urge on or to hold
back?*

The poem was printed with doubling, and even quintupling, by Azharite poetasters; his brother began by reading out every line, but it was not long before the boy became

¹ Twelfth-century writer of Basra. His *Assemblies*, a collection of fifty pieces in rhymed prose comprising the adventures of one Abu Zaid, are noted not only for their literary quality but for their liberal spirit.

² 'Aly, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, and fourth Caliph, was famous for his aphorisms. The speeches attributed to him were actually written some centuries later.

³ Tenth-century poet of Syria.

disgusted with the padding, and they both concentrated on the original.

The boy only mentions this poem here because at the time of his learning it he chanced upon another verse of Abu Firâs which fell very strangely on his ear:

*I turned bedouin, though of settler stock, because
Who misses you lives in a desert.*

But the young sheikh learnt the line and taught it to his brother so:

Who, miss, is yon liver in a desert?

The boy wondered what in the world this could mean. He thought it strange, too, that the word "miss" should appear in poetry in this sense. But later on, when he was older and knew more, he was able to read the line correctly and understand it. He realised, moreover, that the word "miss" was admitted into both prose and poetry by the later 'Abbasids.¹

The boy's introduction to literature was in fact scrappy and unsystematic. He picked up various fragments of prose and verse, but never concentrated on anything for long. All he did was to learn a passage here and there when occasion offered, before switching back to more conventional studies.

One day at the beginning of a new academic year the young men came back home in a state of wild excitement over a new lecture they had heard that morning in the Porch of 'Abbas, on literature, or more exactly on the anthology entitled *El-Hamâssa*,² by Sheikh Marsafy.

They had been so entranced by this lecture that they bought the anthology that very day on the way home and determined not only to attend the whole course but to learn the contents by heart. The boy's brother, always first in the field, rushed off to buy Tibrîzy's³ commentary on the antho-

¹ The mistake arises from the omission of the short vowels and case-endings in most Arabic texts, which here leads to the misreading "sitt," colloquial for "woman," instead of a classical word of different vowelings and meaning. The 'Abbasid dynasty ruled in Baghdad from the middle of the eighth century; the writers here alluded to are those of the later ninth and tenth centuries.

² The *Valour* is a collection of Arabic poetry by Abu Tammâm, a poet of the ninth century. The anthology, which is arranged by subjects, takes its name from the first part, consisting of war poems.

³ Celebrated eleventh-century scholar of Baghdad.

logy. He had it elegantly bound, to grace his new bookcase, and actually dipped into it now and again. He started learning the anthology by heart with his younger brother, and occasionally took a glance at Tibrîzy's commentary. But he read and studied it exactly as if it were a law-book or a primer of theology.

The boy felt instinctively that this was not the way to take an anthology of poetry. The young sheikh and his friends regarded the *Hamâssa* as text, with Tibrîzy's work as its primary commentary, and were sorry to find that the commentary had not in its turn been glossed.

They told many an amusing tale of Sheikh Marsafy's badinage and the way he jeered at the Azharite doctors and their text-books. But their admiration for him was tinged with mockery, and all his sarcasm could not cool their faith in Azharite learning.

These conversations enraptured the boy and he yearned with all his heart to attend the lecture himself. But it was not long before the young men, who had left so many literary lectures, abandoned this one too. They did not consider it a serious course, since it was not on the basic syllabus of the Azhar, but was one of the supplementary courses initiated by the Imam under the heading of "Modern Sciences," which included geography, mathematics and literature. Besides, the sheikh's sarcasm was so extravagant and biting.

Accordingly his opinion of them fell, as theirs did of him. He found them ill-equipped for literary studies, which call for taste rather than dialectical skill, while they considered him incapable of true scholarship and fit only to recite poetry and crack everlasting jokes.

Nevertheless they were meticulous in attendance at this lecture, because the sheikh was a close friend of the Imam and enjoyed his support. The sheikh for his part took every possible occasion to write poems in honour of the Imam. After their presentation he used to dictate them to the students and oblige one or two to learn them by heart as poems of rare quality and merit. They were in fact very much admired, but only as panegyrics of the Imam.

The young men tried very hard to be regular at this lecture

but lacked the necessary perseverance. In the end they gave it up and returned to lingering over their midday tea, which they could now enjoy at leisure. So after learning by heart a fair proportion of the *Hamâssa* the boy was cut off for a time from all contact with literature. Then one day came the news that Sheikh Marsafy was to devote two days a week to reading the *Mufassal*, Zamakhshary's grammar.¹ The boy went to this new lecture and after one or two visits was so delighted with the sheikh that he attended his literary lecture too, on the days when that occurred, and became from that time forward his devotee.

The boy had a very retentive memory and there was not a word the sheikh uttered which he did not treasure, not an idea or interpretation of his which he could ever forget. Many a time the sheikh quoted a line containing some words he had explained before, or alluded to an anecdote he had related in an earlier lecture. On such occasions the boy was able to repeat from memory almost anything that he had previously heard from the sheikh's lips; his anecdotes and explanations, his theories and opinions, his criticisms of the anthologist or his commentator, his corrections and continuations of Abu Tammâm's extracts: no matter what it was, the boy had it by heart and could repeat it at will.

No wonder the sheikh took a liking to the lad and began to engage in discussion with him during lectures. He called him up afterwards and walked with him to the gate of the Azhar and even requested his company further on the road. One day he took him so far that finally the two of them, with some other students who were with them, sat down at a café beside the road. It was the boy's first experience of cafés. There they stayed from the middle of the day until the muezzin chanted his call for afternoon prayer. The boy returned home in an ecstasy, brimful of hope and energy.

Once outside the lecture-room the sheikh could talk about nothing else but the Azhar and its sheikhs and their false methods of teaching. Whenever this subject cropped up the sheikh became bitterly sarcastic. He was merciless in his criticism both of his teachers and of his contemporaries. But all this only made his students the more fond of him. Upon

¹ See note on p. 100.

the boy in particular his influence was lasting and profound.

Little by little the young man came to prize this lecture above all the rest, and two other students who were closely attached to the sheikh became his special friends and later his constant companions. They met in the mid-morning to attend the sheikh's lecture and then went on to the National Library to read ancient literature until late in the afternoon, when they came back to the Azhar and sat down in the passage which runs between the Administration and the Porch of 'Abbas. Here they chatted about their teacher and the books they had read in the library, then turned to making fun of the other lecturers, and in fact of every sheikh or student who came in or out of the Azhar. After evening prayer they went into the Porch of 'Abbas and listened to a lecture on the interpretation of the Koran, which since the Imam's death had been given by Sheikh Bakhât.

But these three listened to Sheikh Bakhât's lectures in a very different spirit from the other students. They came merely to laugh at him and to record his mistakes, which were especially frequent when he was dealing with language or literature. What they really enjoyed was meeting afterwards to laugh over the howlers he had made and retailing them next day to Sheikh Marsafy, who was thus provided with fresh material for sarcasm at the expense of his colleagues.

The three friends felt cramped in the Azhar, and this sheikh and his teaching only intensified the feeling. They longed to break out and be free, and when Sheikh Marsafy taught them their chains seemed to vanish into thin air.

I know of nothing in the world which can exert so strong an influence for freedom, especially on the young, as literature, and above all literature as Sheikh Marsafy taught it when he was explaining the *Hamâssa*, and later the *Kâmil*,¹ to his class. What then did this study consist in? Unfettered criticism of poet, anthologist and commentator, not to mention the various philologists. Then testing and exercise of taste by inquiry into the elements of beauty in literature: in prose and poetry, in general drift and detailed meaning, in rhyme and rhythm, and in the combination of individual

¹ See note on p. 54.

words. Then experience of the up-to-date sensibility which was part of the atmosphere of his circle, and a constant sense of contrast between the gross taste and jaded wits of the Azhar and the delicacy and penetration of the ancients. The final result of all this was to break the chains of the Azhar once for all, to arouse an utter disgust—as a rule entirely justified, though in some cases unmerited—with the taste, scholarship, conversation and general behaviour of the sheikhs.

All this explains why out of all the students that thronged to his first lectures there was soon only a small group left, amongst whom those three friends in particular were outstanding. They made only a small band, but it was not long before they became notorious throughout the Azhar among both doctors and students, especially for their critical attitude towards the Azhar, their contempt for its traditions, and above all for the lampoons they wrote upon its inmates. So the Azhar came to hate them—but at the same time to fear them too.

Sheikh Marsafy was not merely a teacher, but a man of the broadest culture. In conversation or lectures at the Azhar he assumed all the gravity of a learned sheikh; but when he was alone with his intimate friends he lived the life of a humanist, conversing with perfect freedom on any subject under the sun and quoting the poetry and prose, yes, and the lives, of the ancients, to prove that they had been as free and unconstrained as he was and had talked of everyone and everything with the same unhesitating candour as himself.

It was the most natural thing in the world for his pupils to follow his example. They loved and admired him; they regarded him as a model of patience under adversity and contentedness with little, of abstinence from unacademic pleasures, and freedom from the besetting sins of his kind: that is to say, intrigue, backbiting, imposture, and above all toadying to the great.

They had seen with their own eyes, almost felt with their own fingers, that he was like this. Had they not actually shared his life with him on their visits to his home? It was an old, tumbledown house in Haret El-Rakrâky, a filthy side-street near Bab El-Bahr. There at the far end of this alley

lived Sheikh Marsafy, in a miserable ruin of a house. On entering the door you found yourself in a dank, narrow passage, which, apart from the most noisome smells in creation, contained nothing whatsoever but a wooden bench, long and narrow and bare, propped up against the wall and covered with its crumbling dust. After welcoming his students the sheikh would sit down with them on this uncomfortable bench. Yet he was perfectly happy and contented as he listened with a smile on his lips to what they had to say, or talked to them with a charm and sincerity and freshness that no one could rival. Sometimes he was occupied when they came to visit him, in which case he would invite them into his room. To reach this they had to climb up a decrepit old staircase and cross an empty hall-passage open to the sunlight. Then on entering the room they would find a bent old man sitting on the floor with scores of books around him, in which he was searching for some fragment he wanted to complete, some word or verse he needed to check or explain; or making up his mind about one of the traditions. On his right would lie the coffee things. He did not get up for them when they came in, but always showed himself delighted to see them. He invited them to sit down wherever they could find a place and asked one of them to make coffee and serve it to the company. Then after chatting with them for a few minutes he would ask them to join him in the researches on which he had been engaged when they came.

There was one visit to the sheikh which the young man and one of his two friends are never likely to forget. One day about the time of afternoon prayer they went up to his room and found him sitting on a low couch in the hall-passage. Beside him was a wizened old woman, bent almost double with age. The sheikh was giving her food. When he saw the two students he greeted them warmly and asked them to wait for a moment in his room. Then a few minutes later he reappeared and excused himself with a good-humoured smile: "I was just giving her something to eat," he said. "It's my mother."

Out-of-doors Sheikh Marsafy was a pattern of dignity and composure, always calm, unruffled and serene. He was the very picture of ease and prosperity and would strike you in

conversation as a man whom fortune had smiled upon and blessed with a life of comfort and security.

But his pupils and intimate friends knew the truth. In actual fact he was one of the poorest and most destitute of men. Week in week out he ate nothing but his bread ration from the Azhar dipped in a little salt. At the same time he was giving one son a first-rate education, keeping others in decent comfort as students at the Azhar, and thoroughly spoiling his daughter.

He managed all this on a slender allowance of no more than three and a half pounds a month. His first-class degree brought him one and a half pounds, and besides this there was the literature course which the Imam had given him; that produced another two. He was too embarrassed to draw his allowance at the end of the month himself; it disgusted him to have to join the throng of sheikhs who regularly pounced upon the usher at this time to claim their cash; so he used to hand over his seal to one of his special pupils, who would draw this meagre pittance for him in the morning and deliver it to him in the afternoon.

This was the sheikh's manner of life as his pupils saw and shared it: hard, yet dignified and free. Their experience of the other sheikhs, however, filled them only with fury and contempt. No wonder, then, that they lost their hearts to Sheikh Marsafy and learnt to imitate not only his way of life but his contempt of the Azharites and his revolt against their outworn traditions.

His students had at that time nothing to reproach him with, except that he once swerved from his loyalty to the Imam. On the occasion¹ of Sheikh Sherbîny's appointment to the rectorate he wrote a poem in praise of the new head, whose pupil and favourite he had been; and to be sure Sheikh Sherbîny deserved his admiration and affection. Sheikh Marsafy dictated the poem to his pupils and entitled it *The Eighth Mu'allāqa*, thus comparing it with Tarafa's poem.² When he had finished the dictation and the students came up to discuss it with him he continued praising his

¹ March 1905, i.e. after the Imam's resignation from the Administrative Council, but before his death (see introduction).

² See notes on p. 112. Marsafy's poem was of the same metre and rhyme as the second *Mu'allāqa*.

teacher, and contrasted him with the Imam. Abashed, however, by a gentle remonstrance from some of his students, he retracted what he had said and apologised with all humility for his fault.

So it was that these three students were led on by their love and admiration for Sheikh Marsafy to a point where they brought disaster both on themselves and him.

Not content with ridiculing both sheikhs and students, they began to talk openly of their taste for ancient literature in preference to the text-books of the Azhar. In grammar they were studying Sibawaih's *Kitâb*, or the *Mufassal*; in rhetoric, the two works of 'Abdul-Qâhir Jurjâny.¹ Then they were reading a collection of the early poets, which they did not hesitate to sift for themselves. They even went so far sometimes as to recite in public at the Azhar the love-poems they found in these collections, then imitate them, and repeat their own verses to each other when they met. The other students keenly resented all this and lay in wait for opportunities of revenge. Some of the younger ones, however, came to listen to what they had to say and became eager to learn about poetry and literature from them. But their opponents among the senior students were only the more exasperated and began to plot against them more sullenly than ever.

One day our friend was preparing his lesson in the *Mufassal* with one of his two companions when they came across this sentence of Mubarrad: "The lawyers accused El-Hajjâj² of heresy because he had alluded to the worshippers who walked in procession round the tomb and pulpit of the prophet in these terms: 'What they revere is nothing but decayed bones and a few sticks.'" Our friend denied that there was sufficient ground in this statement to convict El-Hajjâj of heresy. "Thoughtless and ill-bred he may have been," said he, "but a heretic, no." Some students who overheard this were indignant and passed the story round.

Then one fine day the three young men were sitting in Sheikh 'Abdul-Hakam 'Atâ's audience when a summons came to them to go to the Rector's room. They went glumly off,

¹ See note 2 on p. 24.

² El-Hajjâj is a gigantic figure in Arab history. He served the Umayyad Caliphs Abdul-Malik and Walid I, and became a byword not only for ruthless vigour as a general and statesman, but also for the biting sarcasm of his tongue.

not knowing what was afoot. When they came into Sheikh Hassûna's¹ room they found that he was not alone; on either side of him sat a number of the leading doctors, who were members of the Administrative Council of the Azhar, including Sheikh Bakhît, Sheikh Muhammad Hasanên El-'Adawy, Sheikh Râdy and others. The Rector greeted them with a stern look and then ordered Radwân, the chief usher, to call in the students he had waiting. A group of students were led in, and the Rector asked them what it was that they had to say. One of them stepped forward and accused the three friends of heresy, on the evidence of their remarks about El-Hajjâj, and added a number of other strange tales about them.

This student was a regular blackleg. He raked up against the three friends a host of insulting comments they had made about various sheikhs, especially Sheikh Bakhît, Sheikh Muhammad Hasanên, Sheikh Râdy and Sheikh Rifa'y, all of whom were present and so heard with their own ears what the young men thought of them. Other students testified to the truth of all he said. On being questioned, the three admitted to everything. The Rector neither spoke to them nor paid them the slightest attention. He merely called up Radwân and abruptly ordered him to erase their names from the register, for he would have no such nonsense as this talked in the Azhar. With that he sent them about their business. They came out crestfallen and perplexed, wondering how they should break the news to their parents.

The matter did not end there. The students, of course, made fun of them and gloated triumphantly over their disgrace. But worse was to come. After late evening prayer they went to meet Sheikh Marsafy and listen to his lecture on the *Kâmil*. But as soon as he arrived Radwân came up and politely informed him that the Rector had suppressed the lecture on the *Kâmil*, and looked forward to seeing him next day in his study.

Gloomily the sheikh went his way, and with him the three young men, sorrowful and abashed. He did his best to console them; but while they were walking with him it occurred to

¹ Rector of the Azhar on three occasions between 1895 and 1909.

them that they might go and apologise to Sheikh Bakhîr and ask him to intercede with the Rector on their behalf. "Do no such thing," said the sheikh, "it would be most unwise." However, they disregarded his advice and went to Sheikh Bakhîr's house. He recognised them as soon as they were admitted, and welcomed them with a smile, then with the utmost composure invited them to explain their case. They attempted to defend themselves, but he merely replied: "Aren't you studying Mubarrad's *Kâmil*? Mubarrad was a Mu'tazelite,¹ and to read him is a sin."

Whereupon they forgot that they had come to make their peace with him and began to argue with the sheikh so hotly as to exasperate him. When they left he was in a fury, and they in despair. However, they laughed heartily together over some of the things he had said; and before parting they had agreed to keep the matter from their parents' ears until fate should take its course.

They met Sheikh Marsafy on the next day and learnt from him that the Rector had forbidden him to read the *Kâmil*, and insisted on its replacement by the *Mughny*² of Ibn Hishâm. Moreover he was to be moved out of the Porch of 'Abbas to a pillar in the entrance-hall of the Azhar.

Marsafy took his revenge by making fun of the Rector. Nature had not intended the man for learning, said he, or for the rectorate, but only to sell honey in the streets of Syriakos. Sheikh Hassûna had lost his teeth, and pronounced the *s*'s in Syriakos like *th*'s; as he spoke the dialect of Cairo he left out the *k* and lengthened the *o*; and apart from this he mumbled. So Sheikh Hassûna (God rest his soul) was known by a nickname which no student of his can ever forget: "The honeytheller of Thyria'oth."

But this honeyseller of Syriakos was a stern and resolute man who was thoroughly feared by the whole staff. Sheikh Marsafy was no exception; so he duly began reading the *Mughny*. The students attended just as before, without caring

¹ In origin this word means "neutral" as between faith and unbelief, and so "sceptic." But the enemies of this great school of intellectualist theologians interpreted it as meaning "schismatic" or "seceder." As well as Mubarrad, men like El-Jâhiz (p. 7) and Zamakhshary (p. 100) also belonged to this school.

² Naturally a more conventional book (see notes to pp. 92 and 98). The full title means *Satisfier of the Intelligent*.

what book it was he read with them. It was enough that he should be reading and they listening to him, and that when they spoke to him he should hear them. The young man would have liked to offer his sympathy, but his teacher gently silenced him: "No, no. Say nothing. I have to live, that's all." The young man cannot remember an occasion since the time of his arrival at the Azhar when he felt so miserable as then. They parted that day from their teacher, those three friends, with an ache in their hearts.

Far from submitting meekly to the Rector's sentence, however, they cast about for a way of getting their punishment annulled. One of them, it is true, chose to yield. He left his two companions and took refuge in the mosque of Mu'ayyad, where he could avoid both friends and enemies, until the storm had blown over. The second told the story to his father, who proceeded to make secret representations in favour of his son. But he did not fail his friend. Every day they went together and sat down between the Porch of 'Abbas and the Administration, where they resumed their habit of lampooning both staff and students.

As for our friend, there was no need for him to tell his brother anything, for he had eventually found out, though how exactly the boy never knew. He neither blamed nor scolded him, merely saying: "It's your own fault; you had your pleasure and now you must take the consequences, however unpleasant." The young man received no sympathy from anyone, sought nobody's help, and asked no one to intercede for him with the Rector. But what he did do was to write a strong article attacking the whole Azhar, especially the Rector, and demanding freedom of opinion. What was to stop him from doing this, now that *Al-Garîda*¹ had appeared and daily carried a leading article by the editor in favour of this liberty?

Our friend took his article to the editor of *Al-Garîda* and found him cordial and sympathetic. He read the article and then handed it to a friend who was in his room at the time. The latter cast an eye over it and then remarked angrily:

¹ This paper appeared from 1908 till 1914, and was the organ of the "People's Party" of moderate reformers. The editor was Lutfy el-Sayyid Pasha, Rector of Fuad I University for three separate periods between 1925 and 1941.

"If you hadn't already been punished for your sins, this article alone would be enough to damn you." The young man would have liked to answer him, but the editor gently stopped him: "The man you are talking to is Hassan Bey Sabry, Inspector of Modern Sciences at the Azhar."¹ Then he went on: "What is it you want to do? To insult the Rector and cast a slur on the Azhar, or to get your punishment withdrawn?" "I want my punishment withdrawn," replied the boy, "and I also want to enjoy the freedom which is due to me." "Leave the affair to me, then," said the editor, "and don't let it worry you."

The young man went away and shortly afterwards he and his two friends were informed that the Rector had cancelled their punishment and was not erasing their names from the registers. He had only wanted to scare them, nothing more.

Thenceforth the young man began to call regularly on the editor of *Al-Garîda*, until the time came when he saw him every day. It was in his office that the young man realised his long-cherished dream of entering the lay world of the tarboush, just when he was sick to death of the turban and all that it implied. But in this society he met the wealthiest and most influential of men, while he himself was a poor man from a middle-class family, whose situation in Cairo was miserable in the extreme. And this gave him to think seriously about the fearful gulf which separates the rich and well-to-do from the struggling poor.

¹ Hassan Sabry Pasha in 1940 became Prime Minister of Egypt and died in harness.

XX

THE young man became more and more disgusted with the Azhar, where he was committed to a life he loathed and cut off from all that he longed for. No sooner had he settled in Cairo at the beginning of the academic year than he began to yearn for it to end. God alone can know how glad he was when the first signs of summer appeared and the whole district he lived in became rife with intolerable smells which sprang up in the heat of the sun until the air was thick with them and even breathing became unbearable. There was not a lecture, morning or afternoon, from whatever sheikh, at this time of the year at which he did not sooner or later doze off, to start up again with a brutal jerk when the students crowded round, laughing or indignant, to wake him up.

No wonder, then, that the arrival of summer made him gay and light-hearted, since it heralded the approach of the holidays when he would go back to the country and take a rest from the Azhar and everyone in it. Not for this reason alone did he look forward to the holiday, nor because he would see his people again and enjoy the good things he had missed in Cairo. Apart from all this he had one special reason for looking forward to them which outweighed all the rest: spiritually and intellectually they were far more satisfying than the whole of the academic year itself.

The holidays gave him the leisure to think; and what advantage he took of it! Then the chance to read with his brothers; and how rich and varied was the reading they did!

The young men of the family came home from their schools and institutes with their satchels full of books quite unrelated to their regular studies which they had no time to read during the year. There were serious books and books for amusement, translations and originals, modern books and classics.

Before they had been at home a week they were bored with doing nothing. Shaking off their inactivity they plunged into their books and remained engrossed in them all day and

half the night. Their father was delighted at this and congratulated them upon it; though sometimes he was displeased and even scolded them when they turned to folk-tales and became absorbed in the *Thousand & One Nights* or the stories of 'Antara and Saif Ibn Zhî Yazan.¹

But whether the family liked it or not, they continued to devour such books and derived twice as much pleasure from them as from their Azharite text-books. Apart from this they read the translations of Fathy Zaghlûl² from the French, and of Siba'y from the English; the articles of Jurjy Zaidan³ in the *Hilal*, with his novels and works on the history of literature and civilisation; Jacob Sarruf's³ writings in the *Muqtataf* and Sheikh Rashîd Rida's² in the *Manâr*.

Then they read the books of Qâsim Amîn² and many of the works of the Imam, then some of the many novels translated into Arabic for a more popular taste, which fascinated them with the pictures they gave of a life utterly different from anything they had known either in town or country. All this tempted them to intensify their reading to a point where it became a menace not only to their own welfare but to the family's. They never saw an advertisement in the press for an unfamiliar book, whether new or old, but they sent the publisher an order for it. Not many days would pass before the book—or books—arrived by parcel post, and the family would be compelled willy-nilly to pay for them.

Another joy which the holidays brought the boy was the chance to think about absent friends, to write letters to them and receive their answers. These exchanges gave him a zest and satisfaction far greater than he could derive from their conversation and companionship in Cairo.

Then there was the delight of meeting other young men from outside the family who belonged to the world of the tarboush. Some of them had come from secondary or higher training schools to rest at home in the country like himself. It was a joy for them to meet and talk with him, as it was for

¹ Popular romances on the lives of two half-legendary pre-Islamic heroes, written down centuries after their death.

² For these three men see introduction.

³ Authors of Syrian origin. Both reviews still appear in Cairo. Zaidan's novels deal mostly with Islamic and Egyptian history. He was a pioneer among Arabic writers in the application of Western scientific method to the history and literature of the Arabic-speaking peoples.

him to meet them, and they had plenty of questions to ask each other about their different courses of study. Sometimes they would read him passages from their books or he would introduce them to some literary classic.

The beginning of one of these vacations was rather less pleasant. A change in the family fortunes had obliged them to move from the town in which the boy had been born to the southernmost part of the province, in the first place; then after staying a year there they moved again to the most distant part of Upper Egypt, where they settled for a long period. Our friend bitterly regretted his home town and felt ill at ease in these strange unfamiliar places where he never knew which way to turn. But in the end he became reconciled to this town in the far south, which he learnt to know and to love like a second birth-place. Yet his first acquaintance with it had been painful in the extreme.

He went with the rest of the family to join his father, who had begun his work there alone. As soon as he had made all his arrangements and felt settled he invited his family to move there too. This occurred in the summer vacation, so that the boy travelled with them. They caught the train in the middle of the night and arrived at their destination at four o'clock the next morning. It was a newly-built town, and the train only stopped there for one minute. The family was a sizeable group, led by the eldest son, and including women and children, not to mention a mountain of baggage. As the train neared the station the elder sons attended to the women and children and piled up all the luggage close to the carriage door, so that when the train stopped at the station they were able to drag everything out onto the platform and then leap out after it themselves. Not a single thing was forgotten or left behind—except the blind boy.

He was thoroughly scared to find himself alone and helpless. However, a few passengers, seeing the plight he was in, took pity on him and reassured him as best they could. When the train stopped at the next station they set him down and handed him over to the telegraph-man before returning to their carriage.

The boy learnt later on that the family had reached their

new house and started looking round, inspecting all the rooms and putting everything in its place. Then their father came in and sat down to chat with his sons and daughters.

Some considerable time after the family's arrival the boy's name chanced to crop up in conversation. Immediate alarm on the part of his father, mother and brothers: the elder sons rush to the telegraph-station. Without success, however. It was some time before news came that he was at the next station, waiting for someone to come and rescue him. So one of them came and brought him home on the crupper of a most eccentric mule, which at one moment would be walking quite gently and at the next break wildly into a trot; all of which only added to his discomfiture.

The boy will never forget the time he spent with the telegraph operator. He was a spirited young man, full of mirth and pleasantry. His room was the meeting-place for a crowd of station employees, who at first resented the young man's presence there, though as soon as they had heard his story they showed him sympathy and kindness. Seeing before them a blind sheikh they assumed that he was an excellent reciter of the Koran and a first-class chanter. So they asked him to sing them something. When he protested that he was not a good singer they asked him to recite them something from the Koran, and though he swore that he had no voice for Koran-reading they insisted on hearing him and would take no refusal. So the boy was compelled to recite the Koran in shame and anguish of heart at a moment when he loathed life and cursed the day he was born. His voice stuck in his throat and the tears streamed down his cheeks. So at last they had mercy on him and left him alone with his misery until someone came to take him home.

This mishap, though it wounded the young man deeply, did not make him dislike his new home or regret coming there. On the contrary he loved it, and on the approach of summer he used to long to go back there, though the heat was well-nigh unbearable.

In the tenement at Cairo there were many changes. Of the older students two had secured their doctor's degree and the rest, including the young man's brother, had joined the newly

founded¹ School for Qâdys. The young man himself had lost the cousin who had been the main relief of his solitude both at the Azhar and in the tenement; he had joined the *Dar El-'Ulûm*.²

The young man saw himself condemned once more to the stony solitude which long before in the first months of his life as a student had caused him so much suffering. In fact it would be a great deal worse, since there would be no one at all to look after him when he went back to Cairo at the end of the summer. His brother would be attending the School for Qâdys and his cousin the *Dar El-'Ulûm*. How could he manage alone in the tenement? What was the use, to himself or anyone else, of his going to Cairo? He had already acquired a reasonable store of knowledge. What profit was he likely to derive from the doctorate, even if he obtained it? In all probability he would fail, for success demanded an effort such as he could never make alone. So his brother argued when he spoke to the family about him one day towards the end of the summer vacation. His father would have liked to say something in reply, but he was struck dumb by these unanswerable arguments. His mother could find no answer either, and merely wept in silent misery. The young man could only stumble away and stay in one of the rooms alone, grim and heartbroken, his mind a blank.

The night was long and burdensome, and his heart ached with misery. He got up without saying a word, and no one spoke to him. The day dragged by as heavily as the night. Then in the evening his father came up to him, stroked his head and kissed him: "You shall go to Cairo," he said. "You are to have a servant of your own." It was all he could do to prevent himself bursting into tears, and his mother too was almost overcome.

The day of departure arrived and he went off with the other young men of the family to catch the train. The servant's people had agreed to meet them at the station. But the young man waited there until the train came in, and no servant arrived. So the others boarded the train and went off, leaving their brother behind. The young man and his father walked back home in gloomy silence.

¹ 1907.

² Training College for teachers of Arabic.



That same evening the servant arrived and he recaptured all his gaiety and cheerfulness. Two days later he travelled to Cairo with his small black servant, carrying provisions for his elder brother.

Thus he returned to Cairo and settled there with the negro servant, who took him to lectures at the Azhar, prepared his food for lunch, and read to him, when he was free, in a broken, stumbling voice.

Meanwhile the Egyptian University had been founded¹ and our friend went there and put his name on the rolls. His negro boy took him to lectures at the Azhar in the morning and at the University in the afternoon. He felt a new relish for life, met new kinds of people, and studied with lecturers who were in a different class from those of the Azhar. The University was a long way from the tenement, and so were the School for Qâdys and the *Dar El-'Ulûm*. There was no point in staying there any longer, and the little group moved to another new house in Darb El-Gamamîz.

So the young man started a new life which had practically no relation with the old. Once every week or two, perhaps, he felt a regret for the Azhar; now and again he met Azharite friends on their visits to the University; and from time to time he went to call upon Sheikh Marsafy.

The truth is that deep down in his heart the young man had broken with the Azhar once and for all. Yet his name remained on the registers. Nor did he reveal this final decision to his father for fear that he might feel hurt or disappointed. His father knew nothing whatsoever about the University and cared still less.

One day during the summer holidays, however, after the young man and his brothers had returned to their new home, the post came while they were reading and brought his brother a letter from one of his friends. He read it and then repeated it to the young man. It contained a most wonderful piece of news.

The boy had been studying at the Azhar for eight years, during which time the regulations had been changed many

¹ See introduction. The Egyptian University, first founded in 1908, was reconstituted as a state university in 1925 and renamed Fuad I University in 1938.

times. That summer all students on the rolls had been allowed to increase the nominal period of their enrolment if they could show that they had studied in the Azhar or the other religious institutes before reaching the minimum age for official enrolment, which was fifteen. The result would be to advance the date of their examination and graduation.

The new rule had been announced during the vacation, and their friend had immediately sent an application to the Rector in the young man's name, declaring that he had studied at the Azhar for two years before reaching the required age. He showed the application to two senior sheikhs with whom the boy had never had any sort of acquaintance either at lectures or at any other time. Nevertheless they read it through and witnessed to the truth of the young man's declaration. You could hardly blame them for that; they had hosts of students coming to their lectures, and how were they to know them all?

So it was that the boy learnt, to his great surprise, that he was credited with ten years at the Azhar when in fact he had only spent eight there, and that in two years he would be qualified to take the examination for his degree.

So he had to renew the connection with the Azhar which he had broken or tried to break off, and keep a foot in both camps, that is to say in the University of the Azhar, as it was called at that time, and the Egyptian University. He had to go on living this double life, between two worlds that pulled him different ways: the old world of the Azhar, down in the age-worn streets between the Batinîya and Kafr El-Tamâ'în, and the new world of the University amidst all the modern elegance of Sharia Koubry Kasr El-Nil.

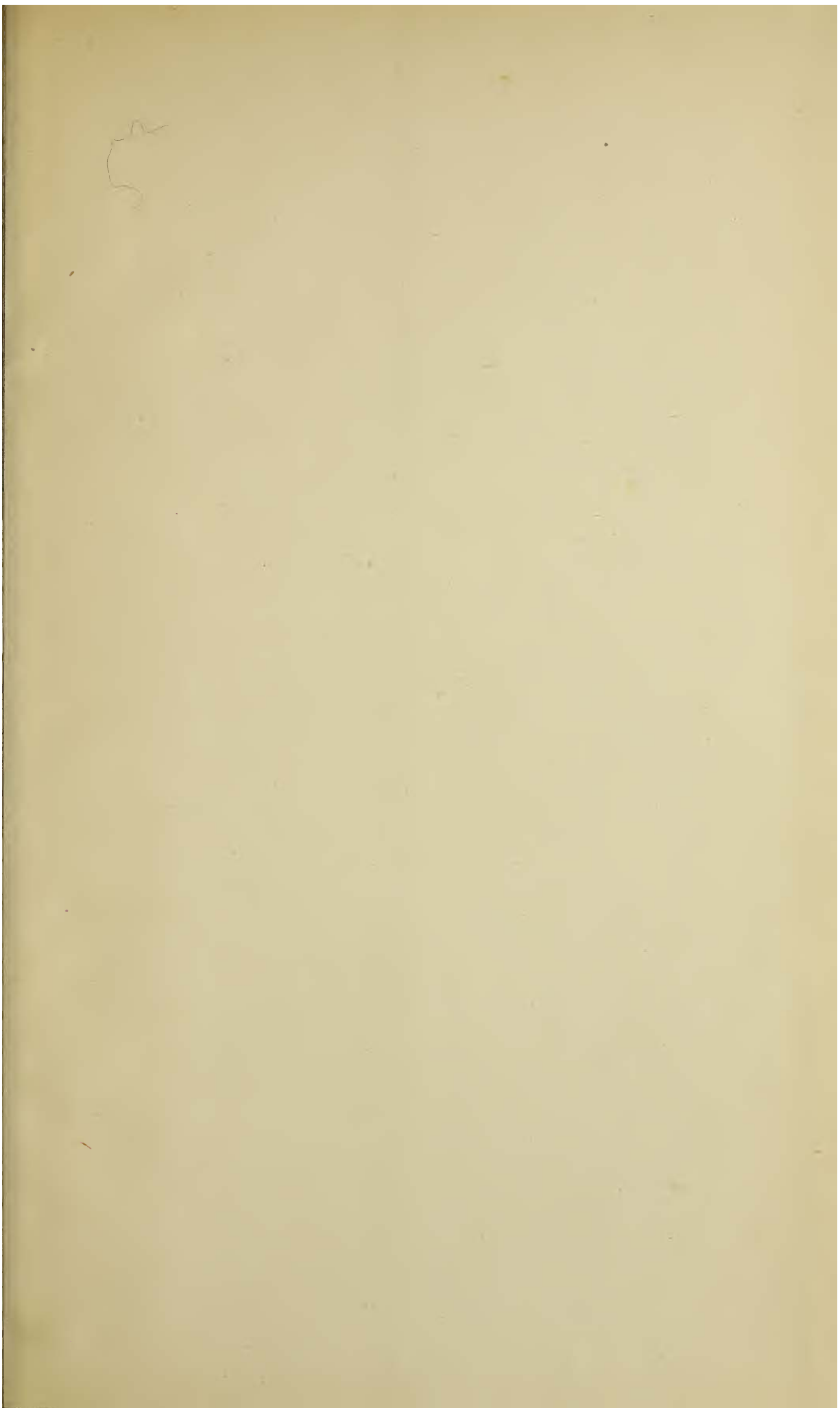
There let us leave him, with the old and the new struggling in him for mastery. Who knows? Perhaps one day we shall resume his story.

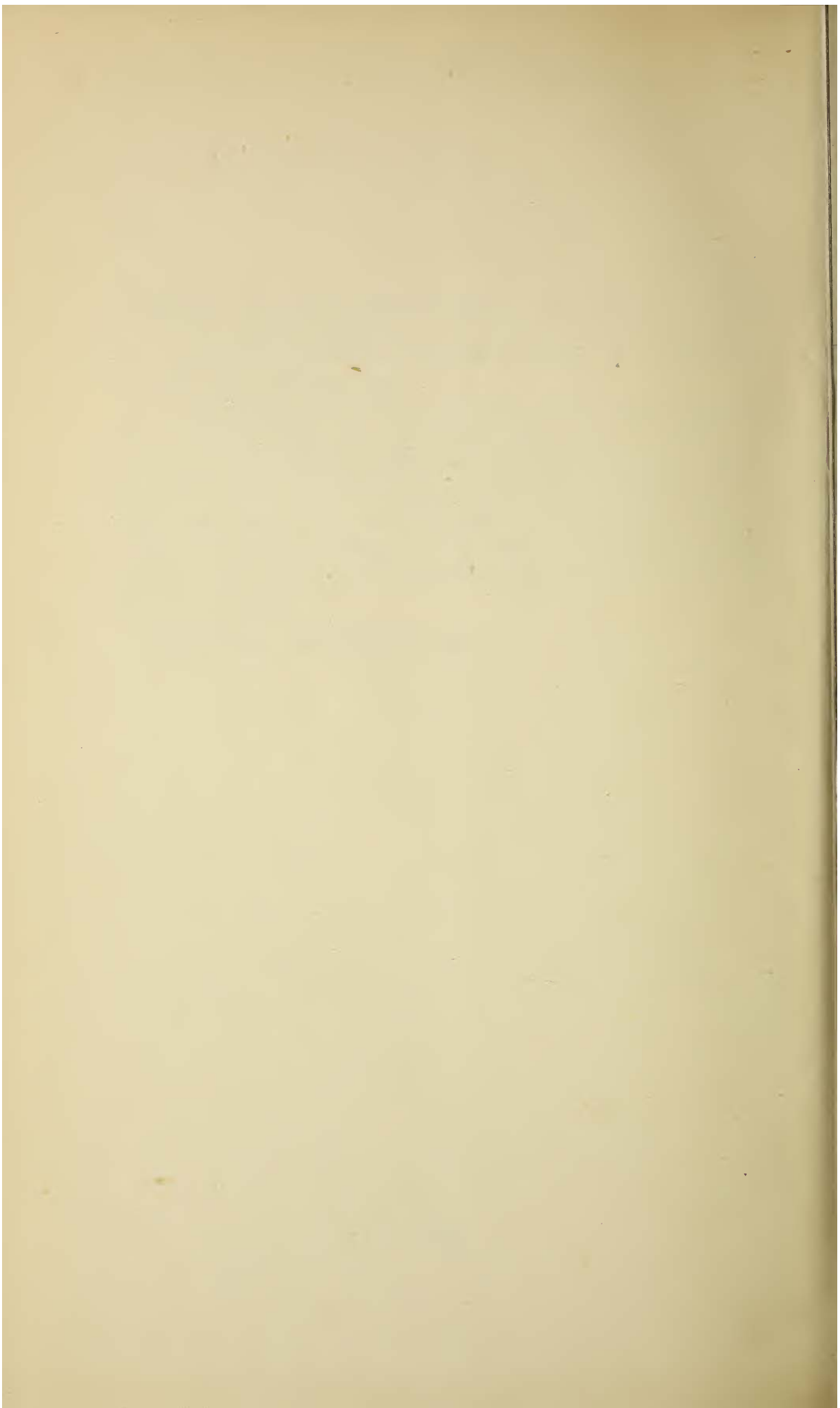
To My Son

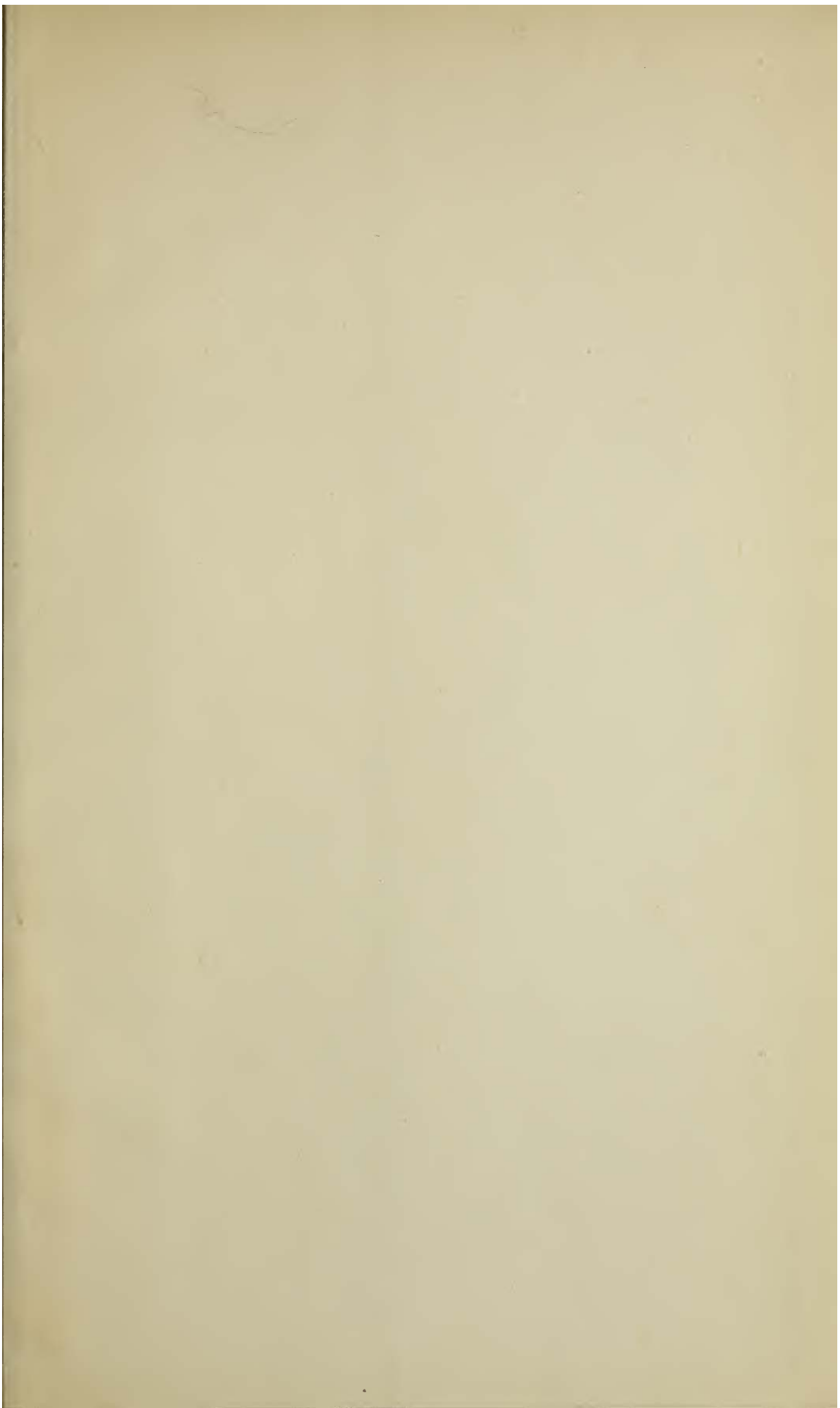
And now you too, my son, young as you are, will be leaving your home, your birthplace, your country, and parting with your family and friends to journey across the sea and live a student's life alone in Paris.

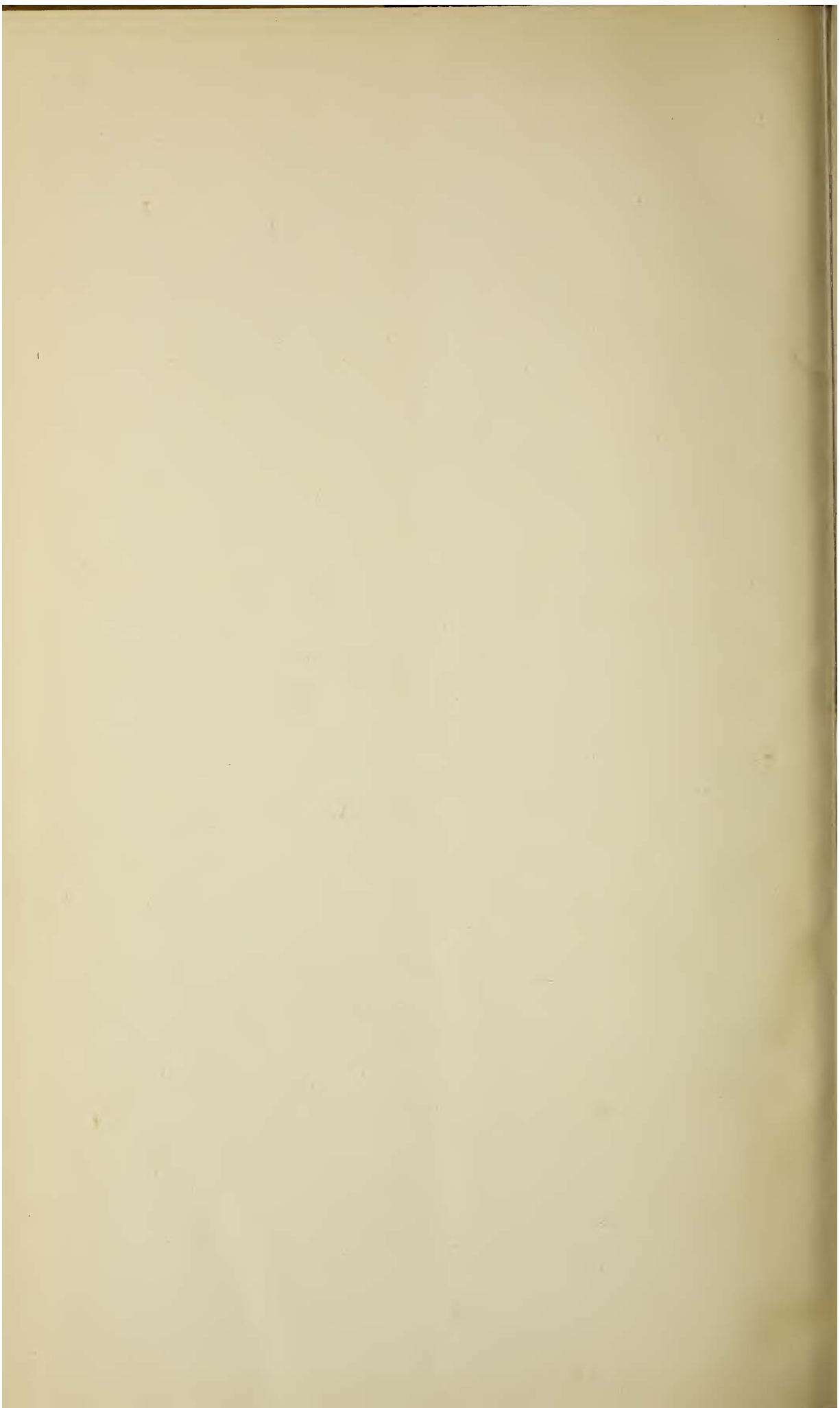
Let me present you with this story. From time to time, when you are worn out with study and tired of Latin and Greek, it may perhaps bring you some comfort and relaxation. You will see in these pages an aspect of Egyptian life which you have never yourself known, and be reminded of someone who has many a time been comforted by your presence and found in your gaiety as in your seriousness unparalleled delight.

Vic-sur-Cère, July-August 1939









THE STREAM OF DAYS

Blind from his birth, Taha Hussein, the son of impoverished peasants, raised himself to a place of outstanding eminence in the intellectual life of Egypt today.

'The Stream of Days' is a translation of the second part of his autobiography, which has become one of the masterpieces of modern Arabic literature. It describes his life as a student in the Islamic university of El Azhar, one of the oldest universities in the world, and the beginning of his revolt from the classical, Koranic tradition to the study of a modern humanistic education.

Living in poverty, he was guided everywhere by his elder brother. Sight plays no part in the story, but the sensitiveness of the blind boy, his intensely alert, loving response, even in pain, to the life around him, etch every incident delicately on the reader's mind. So vividly set among the abundant sounds and smells and passions of old Cairo, the emotional conflicts of his break with the traditions of his fathers become entirely intelligible to a Western audience.

LONGMANS