

The Magnificent Conman of Cairo

Adel Kamel

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MALIM SAID, “NO DOUBT.” THEN he picked up his tools and set off without a backward glance, determined, like a conqueror.

His friend just stood there with a mocking smile on his face. When Malim was a stone’s throw away, his friend called out after him: “We’ll see.”

He said this, laughed, and set off down a different path.

The discussion between Khaled and his father reached an extreme. This was always the case whenever Khaled and his father had talked. No matter how small, how insignificant the matter at hand, the natural course of events was that any conversation would inevitably develop into a bloody battle between father and son.

Of course, Khaled’s father was a wily son of a bitch. He took the kind of pleasure in power that drives a cat to play awhile with its prey before consuming it whole. He dragged his son into interminable arguments. He carefully steered the conversation toward ideas he knew full well his son would find

utterly unbearable. He watched with a focused and malicious joy as his son's chest swelled with righteous rage and his face constricted with anxiety and discomfort.

No sooner had the poor boy rallied than he answered his father, saying, "No doubt."

Then he departed, rushing to the study and closing the door behind him.

Had he waited a moment longer, he would have seen that malicious smile on Ahmed Pasha Khorshed's face, and heard him say, "We'll see."

As soon as the Pasha said those words, he straightened his posture, thrust out his chest, and let loose from the depths of his throat a growling cough. He always did this when he determined to leave his home, as fair warning to all present that the master of the house was departing. Perhaps he was convinced that a cough like this would strike fear into them, as he repeated it when he arrived back at the house. And, in fact, on any occasion worthy of causing fear and trembling.

The moment his servant heard the official farewell cough, he ran to his master and handed him his cane. Then he raced to the door, opened it, and stood at military attention until the lord of the manor stepped over the threshold.

When Ahmed Pasha alighted on the path running through the mansion's gardens, the gardener and his assistants hurried to create a long line for him to stroll past with a scrutinizing gaze and an expression of profound grandeur.

Upon reaching his car—provided, of course, by the state—the soldier near its open door struck a military pose, body taut and holding a dignified salute.

With this, the morning performance was complete. The car transported Ahmed Pasha Khorshed to his place of work, for the beginning of the next performance.

Approximately one hour after the Pasha's departure from the manor, Malim was climbing the stairs of that stately home, filled with fear and trembling. He hesitated a long time. Then he rang the doorbell. The door opened, and a Nubian servant emerged and examined him for a long moment, and then said, "What do you want?"

Malim answered with a stutter, "I'm the carpenter's apprentice. I'm here to fix the window."

The servant cast a look of utter contempt on Malim's lowly self and asked, with a curl of his upper lip, "Why did your master not come himself?"

"He's sick today, and anyway, I can fix it just fine."

At this, the Nubian launched into a tirade against the Arabs and heaped upon them all the insults found in the unique language of his people. After some time had passed, he commanded Malim to remain in the garden until he was called upon. And so Malim sat in the shade of a tree, placed his tools next to him, and let his thoughts wander.

One thing was clear: this was not a good day. And he'd had such high hopes for it. It was, after all, the first day his

master had entrusted him with a job. But Malim knew that life was nothing but struggle. It simply would not do to lose the will to fight. Not after he had steeled himself to refuse the life of a vagabond and layabout. He had to hold firmly to the belief that he was capable of treading the difficult path of honorable work.

Nevertheless, these little shocks disturbed him. He had been raised in the embrace of an absolute freedom, without limits—not even the limits of the law. And he was new at this, having left his previous life less than two months prior to this very moment.

In the neighborhood of Housh Eisa, he would leave his father's house in the early morning accompanied by his dog, Fido, and would not return before midnight. He inherited this style of living from his father except that his father did not have a dog. It was a life that wasn't tied to any home in particular. His father was not the lord of any domicile. Malim neither depended on his father, nor owed him obedience.

But perhaps there were some limits after all. Twice during the day, father and son would join forces on an enterprise that was their main livelihood.

Malim's father did not have a name like normal people. People simply called him the Madman of Housh Eisa. All that people knew about him was that he had, once upon a time, worked at a failure of a newspaper, where he seemed to have written their editorials and all the articles. He was not exactly a literary man. His level of literacy could be likened, say, to

that of a ticket inspector on the tram. But he knew some odd facts about politics and some anecdotes about the lives of certain well-known politicians, and that was more than enough, since no one read his articles anyway. And in any case, the point of the articles was not to be read, but to fill the pages not filled by legal-notice advertisements. For the true mission of the paper, the service it provided the Egyptian people, was to present the public with these notices and in this way to broaden people's social horizons. Valuable knowledge was disseminated concerning the sales of calves and cows, and the seizure of land and real estate.

Nor were the duties of the Madman of Housh Eisa limited to editorial work. He was also responsible for distribution, of which he made a fine art. Despite the fact that the newspaper had no material worth reading, he managed to sell dozens of copies. He did this with his natural gifts: a silver tongue, a charming wit. Qualities that caused hearts to soften and hard currency to appear. However, the newspaper eventually disappeared. It disappeared the moment the government that the owner supported disappeared. At that point, the Madman set aside editing and focused all his attention on the fine art of distribution. Although what he distributed was no longer newspapers.

“Cool water, gardens, and a beautiful face!”

The Madman's voice rang out with these words every dawn and every afternoon as he arrived at a famous café in

the neighborhood of al-Hussein. The café's customers would lift the stems of their hookahs from their mouths, turn toward him, and see him standing on the road. He would be wearing a dazzlingly white galabiya, with his basket in his hand and Malim by his side. The man was extraordinarily well dressed. Every day he would be wearing an immaculate galabiya different from the one he'd worn the day before. He would henna his hair. He doused himself in fragrant perfumes. His fingers were covered in gold rings. He always seemed like a groom on his wedding night. As for Malim, he never much cared about what he was wearing, but he had about him a regal quality that made him beloved to all who laid eyes on him.

After the Madman let loose his cry, he began to circulate among the tables. Whenever he met a group of young men, he swayed toward them, speaking intimately. "Beauty has made itself known. Lights have dawned upon us. Let us ornament it with some fragrant flowers." And he would grab a handful of flowers from his basket and distribute them, or scatter them over their clothes. The boys, eager to keep him by their side, would ask playfully, "What's the news, Madman?"

And here the Madman would divulge the latest secrets in the world of Egyptian politics. Private meetings between this luminary and that and all that was said in intimate detail. He would assure them that his information came from a trustworthy source, who had been present at that very meeting.

And then he would lean in close, shyly, and ask, "Can any of you fine young gentlemen spare a piaster for Malim?"

That was his approach with the young men. With the grown men and the old men, he had a different sort of discourse, which more often than not ended in him slipping them a small item wrapped in silver paper. The Madman was happy with this life, which afforded him many luxuries for little struggle. Malim too was content, because it afforded him absolute freedom. It saved him from the exhausting labors other boys of his age were forced into. How he disdained and lamented those poor souls whose fathers sent them to follow disintegrating carts piled high with pitiful merchandise. Chickpeas. Peanuts. Wandering endlessly along the roads in blazing summer and frostbitten winter, to return at the end of the day with pennies insufficient to feed or clothe anyone. And this if they didn't suffer, as they usually did, from the cruelty of the police, and the tyranny of statutes and laws that seemed to have been laid down for no reason but to block any way for the poor to make a living.

This was why it was necessary for the poor to break the law, or so it seemed to Malim. As for the rich, well, their police records were always clean. Malim felt simultaneously contemptuous and rebellious whenever he passed a police station and found a long line of street sellers and their carts rounded up by the police to be jailed or fined for their laboring to make a legitimate livelihood.

If the cops were not fond of these legitimate enterprises . . . well, there was another side to every coin. And Malim's father was a champion of that other side, which made the son a true admirer of his father. He was, in a word, his role model.

Of course, this other side required a careful attitude, a sharp wit from its adherents. Otherwise, you might find yourself face to face with those same cops. A catastrophic eventuality. What's more, some of those policemen were themselves champions of that other side of the coin. And that particular type of policeman had large hands.

Malim's father was diligent in shaking those hands from time to time. One day, however, a disagreement broke out between him and a cop, and the result was that he was gently deposited in prison. The crime he was accused of was suitably broad and distasteful. He was a guest of the security establishment long enough that he gained some weight, and the henna faded from his hair and moustache. And so Malim found himself without a father. He also found himself without an occupation to satisfy his needs. His friend Bunduq, with whom he had much in common, was of the opinion that he should complete the mission he inherited from his father: to bring joy to people with fragrance and flowers.

But Malim had grown tired of that kind of life. He was, of course, still in the flower of his youth, and he had started to feel a great desire to labor and strive, to expend his energy, to make an honorable living. He was at this point almost a man. He felt in his bowels a great energy, an agitation, which was unfamiliar to him. But he felt that this energy would have no outlet, no realization, if he continued on the path of "a piaster for Malim, gentlemen." Enough of that side of the coin. Let him try the side filled with statutes and laws. And that was why Malim steeled his will toward honorable work.



One day, his friend Bunduq met him hurrying down the road, in a straight path, leaning neither one way nor the other, and carrying a bag full of tools. He stopped him.

“What’s this, Malim?” he asked.

“Tools.”

“Are you picking a lock?”

“Actually, I am going to fix one. I am working at my uncle’s workshop now.”

“Oh yeah? And what does this uncle do?”

“He’s a carpenter.”

Bunduq’s jaw dropped, and stayed dropped for some time. “A carpenter! A carpenter? Seriously? No. No. It can’t be. I won’t believe it.”

Malim shrugged, and began to walk again. “Believe whatever you want—that’s not my problem.”

“And you’re just going to be a carpenter? Forever?”

Malim turned to him, and there was a gleam of anger in his eye. Then he said, with some menace, “Do you have something against carpenters?”

“No, no, certainly not,” Bunduq said with a laugh. “Nothing wrong with carpenters. But that’s what they call honorable work. What I mean is: will it last?”

And here Malim cried out passionately: “No doubt!”

Bunduq cracked up, and said, “We’ll see.”

He said this and went on his way.

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