

Suleiman's Ring

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The Quranic quotation (48:1) on page 155 is taken from the English
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CHAPTER ONE

WHY TODAY?

This thought gripped Daoud Abdel-Malek as he mulled over the events of the hours just past. A feeling that he could not shake held him fast for a long time thanks to this day unlike all others. Time and the seasons blend together; people come and go, and we don't know where they have come from or where they have gone. And every few years, there comes a man unlike the others—one with a distinctive character who grabs us by the lapels and dazzles us for a spell. But soon he disappears along with all those who had vanished before him. The days pass after him as they had before: neither joyful nor sad, neither exciting nor monotonous, but simply ordinary. The sun rises in its accustomed way. Folks rush to their jobs as ever, then return to their homes as always. They are content with their wives and husbands, with their children, with their fathers and mothers. They joke a little, are merry a little, eat a little, and talk a little. Then they split up, or go to sleep, or depart from us, and the smiles with the sorrows all fade away as all these “normal” days merge until once again there comes along an unusual man. Most people think of all that happens in this life as either chance or irony while others call it fate or destiny. What folly!

O God, what is this accursed cold weather?

He was still walking on the Corniche with confident steps, far from the ruckus of Ramla Station, drawing comfort from the repetitive tread of the heels of his shoes on the surface of

the pavement amid the calm that shrouded the street around him in an unusual silence. Under his left arm dangled an oud—the Arab lute—that never left him. Before today he had been merely an oud player who performed in an ensemble at parties for the underprivileged people in Moharram Bey and Maks or the most affluent in Azarita or Ibrahimiyah, where the foreigners lived, with their opulent tips. True, they called him “the King,” but that was only talk—just joking around to have fun with those who brought him money. In any case, the pay—for weddings, birthdays, celebrations during the first week after a birth, and circumcisions—was rather paltry.

His friend Sheikh Hassanein al-Basri, impresario of weddings and Qur’an reader at wakes and funerals, would come to the old house in Moharram Bey, where he had his flat on the third floor. “Hey, *Khawaga* Daoud!” the sheikh called from the entrance in his loud, ringing voice. And Daoud realized at once that there was a job for him somewhere, with thirty piastres attached.

He stopped, turning to look up at the sun setting behind the Silsila quarter stretching out before him, its low buildings heaped up along the horizon before becoming the magical line separating the spreading blue sea from the sky red with its turning, burning, plunging sun. The sun’s lower third had disappeared, signaling for Daoud the departure of an eventful day and promising that, for his sake alone, a completely new sun would rise tomorrow at dawn. He pulled in the sides of his woolen coat, whose gleaming black color from the day he bought it in the Ladies Alley market had changed to a deep mousey hue from long use and neglect. He had wrapped the wine-colored scarf around his neck and adjusted the dark red *tarboush* (the Egyptian fez) stained with black at the bottom—it had never been cleaned or pressed, solely for lack of money—that sagged on his head. He pressed it down to ward off the February cold blowing from the rebellious sea waves, which tumbled and broke wildly, spraying in the wind over the line

of cube-shaped rocks covered with a green carpet of plants and algae that became exposed when the water receded from them. These rocks lay compressed down the length of the Corniche in Alexandria—Daoud’s sweetheart, his refuge, his home, and the place where he was born.

He filled his chest with the bracing smell of the sea, swimming in his thoughts as he contemplated the scene around him and those succeeding events that had made up his day until now. Quickly he put his chilled hand into the right-hand pocket of the coat to feel its warmth, fingering the silver ring abandoned in its depths as he hummed:

*My heart wept for the wound that my lover left in me.
To whom shall you complain, my heart
Now that my lover has left me?*

In those days, Daoud Abdel-Malek was called “*al-Khawaga* Daoud” despite the fact that he wasn’t a foreigner who had come to Alexandria from another country, for example. Nor had he ever left her or even the district of Moharram Bey, where the apartment that he had inherited from his deceased father was located. Except, of course, the rare times when work or immediate necessity compelled him to leave for a few hours or days at most for nearby cities or to Cairo: *Masr*; as the Alexandrians called it. And even that had happened just a few times. Despite the fact that he did not know any other country and spoke only Arabic, he was still called “*al-Khawaga*” because he wasn’t a Muslim like the others. He was called such also even though he had been dubbed “The King of Crooners” in moments of revelry for the number of tunes and songs that he had memorized, his skill in playing the oud, and his strong, sweet voice, to which all would testify. An Alexandrian like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him, born and raised in its streets and alleys, he was educated in its schools until he earned his baccalaureate, but he never

chased after a government posting. He was like a bird who loved his freedom; he would boast of it among his peers.

The days fluttered past until he reached middle age, on the brink of fifty. He was of medium build and modest height, yet he was handsome, with delicate features. Brown-skinned with a bronze cast wrought by the wind, water, and sun of his radiant city, with close-set, honey-colored eyes that always burned brightly. His curling, symmetrical mustache gleamed black like his hair, in which the white roots showed on his sideburns and forelocks, all oiled and combed neatly at all times. He walked haughtily with a broad gait, holding himself higher with each step, always taking care of his clothes and appearance as his material circumstances allowed. He was a vigorous man who loved life, singing, and good cheer.

He liked everyone, but he adored women! He had married three times over the course of the years gone by, losing his first two wives—the first, Budur, to tuberculosis and the second, Sophie, who was of Turkish-Jewish stock, when she ran away. Sophie was the only non-Egyptian woman he had ever been with. She had fled from Egypt in the upheaval of the Second World War when the news spread that the Nazi forces were approaching the town of al-Alamein. Sophie had suddenly packed up her suitcase and, with her child, Margo, in her arms, sailed to Marseilles onboard a little steam ship carrying a small group of European—Ashkenazi—Jews from Alexandria, running away from the coming Germans. Daoud had sired thirteen children, seven of whom were lost in infancy or adolescence while six remained. The dearest to his heart was Suleiman, the eldest son from his current wife, Elaine, who also had borne him Mona and Makari, though the last was carried away by the cholera epidemic of the previous summer. There was also Fouad, the oldest of all his sons, as well as Musa and Layla, whose mother was Budur.

As for Elaine, she had been an orphaned Coptic girl living under the protection of the church in the Sanctuary

of the Virgin in the Kawm al-Dikka district. She was pretty, with wide dark eyes that dominated her face and made people look at her. Her jet-black hair was braided in a ring atop her head, which was extremely round like that of a baby; her wheat-colored skin was soft. But what truly set her apart most was her ceaseless, burning energy. She always used to jump out of bed before all the other girls in the little dormitory and rush off to the church, which was really the last room in the passage that stretched like an artery connecting the rooms of the house.

Against the dormitory's eastern wall they had built a shrine for the Virgin Mary. This, in fact, was but a small wooden table covered with a brightly colored cloth that fell to the flagstones on the floor. The cloth was embroidered with an image of the Christ Child in the arms of the Virgin Mother of God, called the *Theotokos*, a Greek word rendered in Coptic. The word was written in Demotic letters, then in Arabic, on the sign at the church's entrance. Covering the floor in front of the shrine or altar was a simple red *kilim*, a peasant rug, on which Father Mikhail stood to say mass on Sundays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 5:30 in the morning. After this, he would head for the Church of the Virgin in Moharram Bey to share with the Archpriest Morcos Abdel-Messih in saying the mass there, as well.

Elaine tirelessly practiced the rituals of her life with discipline and endurance. She would kneel to say the Matins prayer, the tears running down her cheeks, at dawn each day, before anyone had awoken in the house. Then she would hurry to the kitchen as she sang hymns to the glory of God or even the popular songs of *Si* ("Sir" or "Mr.") Abdel-Wahhab or *al-Sitt* ("The Lady") Thuma (short for Umm Kulthoum), which would reach her ever-sharp ears through the windows, for the radio in the coffeehouse on the pavement across from the home played music both day and night. She would prepare tea and breakfast for Mother Irene, the director of the

orphanage for the girls, who would sneak by, one by one, to the dining room, and spend her day afterward chanting to herself as she worked until sunset. Then all the girls would gather in the little reception hall to hear lessons from the Bible and the hymns that Mother Irene would teach them every day but for Mondays and Fridays, when Father Mikhail would lead the meeting instead.

One day, the house was ready to throw a special celebration for the first-ever visit by the bishop when Master Daoud, the famous oud player from Moharram Bey, came to perform at the hour at which the girls were chanting. As it turned out, he wound up admiring the voice of the young Elaine even before he was drawn to her appearance. Her moving singing with its ravishing tones was at least as good as that of Layla Murad, he had thought at the time. He had just lost his wife Budur and wound up with three children under his roof.

He thought of marrying Elaine and brought up the idea with the priest, who first asked him about his faith to be sure he was an Orthodox Christian. When Daoud said that he wasn't, the priest refused to marry them, of course, unless he obtained the blessing of baptism according to the rites of the Coptic Church. And so Daoud asked, what would he have to do to receive this blessing? The priest explained that he would have to be immersed in a water-filled baptismal basin in one of the halls of the church in which the Holy Spirit resides. Daoud, for his part, was not opposed to this, given that he was urgently in need of a wife at the time. His official religious identity as recorded on the marriage certificate did not matter much to him. Nor was Elaine opposed when she, in turn, learned from Sister Irene of the church's commitment to wed her to Master Daoud Abdel-Malek, a man she didn't know at all, for in principle it was, first and foremost, a matter of submission. Moreover, she saw him as both handsome and respectable regardless of his status as a widower with three children and of the clear difference in age between them. He

was thus acceptable if marriage was her only way out of life in the sanctuary.

He was still playing with the silver ring in the pocket of his overcoat. He grasped it in his hand, then drew it out and put it on his ring finger. He was seized by that obscure feeling of hidden inner power to which he had grown accustomed whenever he wore the ring. He raised his eyes before him in the direction of the rocks and stared at apparitions striding between the waves, which came one after another in close succession. He thought he recognized among them the form of Dinocrates, the Greek engineer of whom he had seen a portrait in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that he inherited from his father, in his diaphanous white robe. This man had drawn the plans for the city of Alexandria on the order of Alexander the Great more than twenty centuries ago. He transformed it from a mere coastline of white sand around a tiny fishing village into a giant metropolis of its age, crammed with palaces and grand buildings. The city of the astounding lighthouse and the awesome library, the capital of the Egyptian state for nearly a thousand years. Yes! A thousand years that stretched from roughly three centuries before the birth of Our Lord until Amr ibn al-As founded the city of al-Fustat as the country's new capital in the middle of the seventh century BC.

On that February evening in 1951, Daoud Abdel-Malek's journey down the pavement of the empty Corniche in Alexandria, while everyone else was savoring the warmth of their houses in the cruel Alexandrian winter, was nothing more than an attempt on his part, in his own way, to share with the limitless sea his private thoughts and feelings. In return he hoped to gain the calmness and clarity of mind that would lead to a full understanding of what had happened to him that morning.

He had awoken at eleven o'clock, as usual after a long night out. While smoking a cigarette he had rolled hurriedly

himself, he drank a cup of coffee ground with fragrant nutmeg, prepared for him by his wife. He usually crumbled the tobacco into a piece of cigarette paper. Next, he would roll the paper and lick its edge until the whole of the cigarette stuck together. Then he would light it and begin smoking, spitting out bits of tobacco that leaked onto his lips. Quickly, he got back into the clothes that he had thrown off onto the chair next to his bed the night before. Then he grabbed his oud, speedily put on the silver ring and his wristwatch, which he kept on the bedside table, and—as he turned the knob on the apartment door—called out, “I’m going out, Elaine!”

This was the time for his rendezvous with Sheikh Hassanein al-Basri, who had spoken to him about a work engagement that might be for three or four nights per week. They had agreed to meet at the Khalil Agha Café in Moharram Bey. And, indeed, he found the sheikh waiting for him when he arrived. Yet he was not alone. With him sat a young man in military uniform whose features seemed instantly familiar. The presence of the young officer surprised him, but Daoud thought that perhaps he had something to do with the job that he had come to discuss.

Sheikh Hassanein was a heavysset, powerfully built man, vain of his Turkish descent with his white skin and sleek black hair that covered his head without the least sign of graying or thinning despite his being in his fifth decade. He always dressed in a *jubba*, caftan, and red turban—the *kakula*—testifying to the two years he spent at al-Azhar, the great center of Islamic learning in Cairo, nearly twenty years earlier. He was a bearded, beturbaned colossus, whose massive form concealed the mind and spirit of a ten-year-old child. With a cheerful face, he was easily delighted and always mirthful to the point that he had none of the grave solemnity of the clergy. His bellowing guffaws rarely left him. He spoke little on the whole, and even more seldom was he serious when he did. Guileless most of the time, indeed, yet he had the instinctive shrewdness of the

common people, and their likeability. *Al-Khawaga* Daoud was the only friend who drew him out of his enclosed little world, meeting him virtually every day either for work reasons or as a companion from his own neighborhood. He sat down facing them, proffering his hand in greeting first to the officer, who gripped it so enthusiastically that it almost hurt.

“Welcome, *Khawaga* Daoud!” he exclaimed. “Don’t you remember me?”

His high-pitched voice did not match his hulking frame, making it seem as though a mischievous waif were hidden within the officer seated before him. Daoud, with a flattering smile on his face—or perhaps one that merely expressed relief at his fingers’ escape from the young man’s violent grip—answered him, “I thought I recognized you, like I knew you a long time ago. Isn’t that so, captain, sir?”

He had cast a surreptitious glance at the three gold stars on the captain’s shoulders before turning toward Sheikh Hassanein, his hand extended in greeting and the words flowing out between his laughs.

“Peace be upon you, Sheikh Hassanein,” he spouted. “Your face is bright and round like the moon, as though you hadn’t been up last night till dawn. I got up by sheer willpower today—if it weren’t for the cup of coffee that *Umm* Suleiman made for me, I wouldn’t have been able to come see you for another two hours. But isn’t it amazing that I’m sitting here like this, all fat and sassy like a turkey, as though nothing had happened!”

These gibing words brought back their laughing and joking together for the more than thirty years of their friendship. Daoud then swiveled toward the officer.

“I’m sorry, Your Excellency the *Bey*,” he told him. “We just like to rib each other sometimes.”

They had spent most of the night, as they always did, talking as Daoud played the oud and sang the songs of Abdel-Wahhab, consuming half an *qirsh*’s worth of hashish

that Sheikh Hassanein had taken as *baksheesh* after presiding over a wedding the day before.

“You’re telling *me*, Khawaga Daoud?” the officer said. “I’ve been witnessing this since I was little. Look, let me remind you of who I am because it’s obvious that you don’t remember me. *Sidi*, I am Gamal, son of Abdel-Nasser Hussein, the postal employee who was your neighbor in Moharram Bey in the twenties. Do you know me now? My father was your friend—you used to stay out late together, and I would listen to you sing the songs of Thuma and Abdel-Wahhab. Our apartment was in Fleming, and you were the sultan with your oud there.”

He gestured toward the instrument that was laid loosely over the chair next to *al-Khawaga* Daoud.

“Ah, Abdel-Nasser Hussein,” sighed Daoud, throwing back his head, wandering absent-mindedly down the corridors of memory opened by these words. He took off his *tarboush* and stroked the hair combed back on his head with his hand. His friend, the respected man who had shared his zeal for patriotic work after the Revolution of 1919 and with whom, before moving to a flat in Moharram Bey after the death of his father, he had exchanged visits for a while in Fleming to plan—secretly, of course—little operations here and there aimed at upsetting the English presence in Alexandria. And he remembered, as well, their happy late nights together on the balcony with the oud and song and the plates of liver *Iskanderani*—Alexandria-style—flavored with hot pepper, cumin, and other spices, the lamb kabab, the *kufta*, and the *tahina* salad, all of which they used to buy fresh at *Amm Sayyid*’s meat shop in summer.

“Excuse me, but you mean, then,” he said, his memory coming back to him, “that you’re the little boy that they sent to your uncle’s place in Cairo after the demonstration in Manshiya? Right, I remember—you’re the son of Abdel-Nasser Effendi—a man with a truly fine ear.”

Then Daoud turned toward the other man with them.

“Sheik Hassanein, you remember Abdel-Nasser Effendi, who was living in the house of Dr. Qanawati?” he asked. “But right—I didn’t know you in the days we were in Fleming.”

The sheikh shrugged, still smiling his radiant smile. If he didn’t remember the man or his son, he still did not want to appear like a stranger to them both, even if the one called Abdel-Nasser Hussein wasn’t his friend to begin with.

“And where is he now?” Daoud asked the captain. “I haven’t seen him for about twenty years. Have you moved to Cairo, or what? Welcome, dear son of a dear one!”

Then he straightened apologetically for speaking so familiarly with someone whom he hardly knew, in fact.

“I’m sorry, captain, sir, if I said something out of line,” Daoud added hastily, “it was just our long acquaintance speaking. Forgive me for saying it, but the last time I saw you, you were like this,” he said as he held his hand in front of him to indicate a half-meter in height.

“Of course, of course, *Khawaga*,” the officer rushed to reassure him. “My father is fine.” Then, in a saddened tone, he added, looking away into the distance, “But my mother has passed away. The most important thing, how are you all doing? We’ve been talking like this, and you still haven’t asked me why I wanted to meet with you.”

Daoud thought of all those years that went back between these friends. Each one had lived a long life on his own path, but time, which had separated them, had also now reunited him with his friend’s son. He had not expected this encounter. Yet he smiled as he contemplated the confused teenager that had become, as if only between night and morning, a young man full of passion and vitality, who had come back to Alexandria once more to meet with him. He thus revived those memories that Daoud had thought had passed into the beyond and perished.

CHAPTER TWO

CAPTAIN GAMAL ABDEL-NASSER, IN HIS mid-thirties, was tall, handsome, youthful, and brown-skinned, with a winning personality—though he liked to control all that happened around him. Words came out of his mouth like bursts from a machine gun. Despite his obvious seriousness, one was utterly unable to resist him within just a few minutes of meeting him. His expression was stern, with a piercing gaze under thatching eyebrows. His neat black mustache rimmed a majestic nose. He seemed wrapped in a halo of simple elegance that belied his middle-class origins, without any hint of the affect or pretension found among most officers in those days, when it was difficult to enroll in the War College if you weren't the son of somebody important or at least recommended by a person of that kind, as often happened at that time. This prompted some of them to brag about their exalted origins or their elite social status as proven by their attaining high positions as officers in the Egyptian army.

Gamal sat up in his chair and reached into the pocket of his military jacket with its gleaming gold buttons and pulled out a packet of cigarettes. He lit one of them and then looked at *al-Khawaga* Daoud, who had gone off in his mind, meandering through many long-ago evenings with Abdel-Nasser Hussein when he was still young.

Daoud thought not only of their taking part together in the demonstrations against the treaty of 1936 and in writing

and handing out leaflets against the king and the British, but also of their clandestine trips to the British barracks in Abu Qir when they planted sticks of dynamite that Daoud had acquired from one of his friends in the Cavalry Corps. He was amazed at how they had kept these memories secret from their families. Twirling the silver ring on his finger, he marveled equally at the extraordinary resemblance between father and son. But soon the officer's words brought him back once again to the Khalil Agha Café. He stared straight ahead over the café owner's desk with its marble covering upon which sat the only telephone in the entire residential block. His gaze continued over the officer's shoulder to the prominent portrait of Farouk I in its gold-plated frame, featuring the king's vacant gaze and suspicion of a smile that labored under a curling mustache. The stream of his thoughts was interrupted by the sound of Gamal asking, "Does the situation in this place please you two?"

"Which place do you mean, effendi?" queried the sheikh quickly. "Do you mean Alexandria? What's wrong with her, do you think?"

"Why just Alexandria?" wondered the captain. "I'm talking about all of Egypt, Sheikh Hassanein. I know that you are interested in patriotic work as you are a member of the Society of the Muslim Brothers here in Alexandria."

Here the sheikh suddenly seemed embarrassed. His torso bent forward and he placed his hand over his mouth, moving it back and forth rapidly to signal that the officer should stop talking.

"*Ayyu!*" he blurted, using an Alexandrian expression to demonstrate his dismay. "Enough, enough—the walls have ears, Captain, sir."

Hassanein then turned toward Daoud apologetically, for until that moment he had concealed from him that he secretly belonged to the Brotherhood despite their long friendship. Perhaps that was because he did not fully believe

in the principles of that association, which he would not have joined but for the insistence of Sheikh Foda of the Ramla district, whose long arm he feared should he not obey him. He had not known anything about political Islam before, but he learned during his few meetings with Sheikh Foda and his companions the creed of the Brotherhood—that Islam was both a religion and a state. He likewise learned that this was the case in the age of the Rightly Guided Caliphs and that it was obligatory for the ruler of the land to be a Muslim who followed God’s law and the traditions of his Prophet and to apply these laws and traditions in practice in his management of the country’s affairs.

“Look, men,” Gamal Abdel-Nasser added in a sharp whisper, thus pulling them back into his speech once again, “I have just now returned from the war in Palestine and am working as an instructor in the War College in Cairo. But Alexandria is a part of me, so I must come and smell the scent of her sea and see her people once in a while. To be frank, I and a few of my friends among the Brothers in the officer corps have formed a nationalist organization. That is, we don’t like the situation in the country, and we dream of change.”

He shifted a little, looking around to gauge the effect of his talk upon his two companions as well as to make sure that what he was saying was not being overheard by the other patrons in the coffeehouse.

“You are people I trust,” he continued, “because I’m sure that there is no one in Alexandria who loves this country more than you men, isn’t that true?”

Daoud was disturbed somewhat by the mention of Palestine. But the dusky youth, who was leaning forward on his haunches against the marble-topped table, did not wait for anyone to respond to his question. Rather, he tried to detect their reaction to his words as it showed on their faces. As he smoked one cigarette after another, it seemed as though his statements emerged from between his lips shrouded in

a cloud of smoke. Both his listeners were enjoying it, so he elaborated at length.

“I’ll tell you a story that really affected me, but maybe nobody knows about it,” he said. “All my life, I dreamed of becoming an officer. That is why, when I first got the results of the final secondary school exam, I rushed to my father to plead with him to find one of the important people he knew who would help me get accepted to the War College—for this was something, as you know, that required the intervention of someone with real influence. By God Almighty, it tore my heart to ask my father to do this for me, but what could I do? My poor father told me that he knew a big shot’s driver, and he promised he would talk to him for me. Two days later, the driver asked me to meet him at the gate of the mansion belonging to the pasha responsible for admitting the new students in order to take me to him. I just couldn’t believe it—I thought that for sure I was dreaming. And for sure I didn’t sleep a wink that night. Instead, I stayed up the whole time, wearing the only suit I owned, standing straight up, afraid that if I sat down, it would get wrinkled. And at dawn I flew to the pasha’s villa and waited by the gate in the iron fence that surrounded the beautiful, well-ordered garden until someone came out in a black Cadillac.

“The driver, Lam‘i, saw me and stopped the car. The pasha opened the window and motioned for me to get in. So, I went around to do so—from the other side, of course. As I opened the door the pasha barked at me, ‘Hey, boy, what is this thoughtlessness? Are you going to sit next to me? Get out and sit up front next to the driver!’ At that moment, I longed for the earth to open and swallow me. What was all this contempt? And why? Why do people treat each other this way? And why did I need ‘His Excellency the Pasha’s’ intercession to get into the War College and become an officer in the Egyptian Army? Isn’t Egypt my country, and not some other people’s country? So as long as I live, I will never forget this episode.”

Then he turned to address Daoud.

“My father told me a lot about you, *Khawaga* Daoud,” Gamal resumed. “He advised me to make you our arm here. We want men with us here in Alexandria to help us print and distribute leaflets and to organize demonstrations—in total secrecy, right to the end. We must regain our country’s freedom and the dignity of our people. You men, what is your view of what’s happening with the British High Commissioner? Or with the Palace?”

Their faces blanched as he spoke these words. But as it seemed neither of them would resist or stand in the way, he concluded the soliloquy that he was determined to complete.

“Sheikh Hassanein,” he said, “I was sent to you directly by Sheikh Foda himself. He is one of our brethren—from the group of officers that I told you about. But the most important thing is discretion. That is, we work very hard in secrecy and silence, even from our families—as though there is nothing going on.”

Here Gamal crumpled the empty packet of cigarettes and threw it on the table in front of him.

“I’ll tell you what, you guys,” he exclaimed. “Isn’t there a tobacco shop around here? These smokes are done.”

“Take the second street to the right, and at the top you’ll find *al-Khawaga* Ballo, the tobacconist,” said Daoud, entranced by the talk that he had just heard.

Gamal stood up and made to go out of the coffeehouse. He walked with steady steps, following the directions given to him by Daoud. Meanwhile, Sheikh Hassanein, the white giant who had been sitting in front of him, raised his cup of tea to his mouth for the first time since their meeting, as though he were waking from an afternoon nap. Then he put it back down on the table and said, as if speaking to himself in a delirium, “What is this crazy discussion? *Ayyu!* Demonstrations, and leaflets, and a palace! And a high commissioner!

“What is that juvenile officer talking about, *Khawaga* Daoud? Is he an agent working against us? Is he an informer

from the police? Isn't he operating undercover, trying to get us in trouble when they find out about the story of those Brothers' associations? May God forgive you, Sheikh Foda! Wait till I see you! *Ayyu!* You're done for now, Sheikh Hassanein! I never attended even two of those meetings. Will they throw me in jail just for that? Wait till I see you, Sheikh Foda! Oh boy, will no one speak up for me?"

The sheikh drew his cloak up on his shoulders, shivering as he stood gripped by the agitation that was part of his Turkish makeup—all this to the astonishment of Daoud, who suppressed a laugh with difficulty. But he took control of himself before speaking.

"Sit down, Sheikh Hassanein," he urged. "Just sit down. Be calm and say a prayer for the Prophet. What police, about what? The point is about these beautiful young people full of zeal who want to do something for Egypt. They're like the rest of them, my brother Hassanein—do you think they are the only ones doing this? And what's the story with you and the Muslim Brotherhood? Later, later—you can tell me later. Just sit down and we'll see what *Si* Gamal wants exactly! This is the son of Abdel-Nasser Effendi, my neighbor and my dear friend, that patriotic man—and on my guarantee!"

The sheikh returned to his seat, still grumbling, as always was his habit in finally yielding to *al-Khawaga* Daoud's opinion. It did not take long before the officer returned with a light-hearted expression, a smile replacing the seriousness that had covered his face. He felt that he had discharged the official duty for which he had come and as though he had stepped out of his military uniform, which he filled with such gravitas and resolve. There returned the fiery young Alexandrian that had been hiding behind that formal mask. He pulled his chair toward him and gave it a half-turn with a joyful twist, mounting it like a knight on his steed.

"Hey, *Khawaga* Daoud, aren't you going to play something for us today—how about from Thuma's list?" he asked playfully.

Sheikh Hassanein's furrowed brow relaxed, and he looked toward Daoud Abdel-Malek to show that he wished he would agree to the strange young officer's suggestion. After all, it wasn't possible for a spy from the political police to want to listen to the songs of "The Lady!" So he raised his arm and cried, "A glass of hot fennel and a water-pipe with molasses tobacco!"

Daoud picked up his ancient oud and cradled it as he adjusted its strings for some minutes while plucking a series of tunes. Then he looked up and called out to the waiter, as though he owned the place, "Turn down that radio a couple of notches, will you, brother? Don't you want me to tune this thing?"

He began to play loudly at first, then softly in the mode known as the *kurd* until he was sure that he had gotten everyone's attention. Gradually the clacking of the backgammon chips on the tabletops, the slap of the cards on marble surfaces, the shouts of the winners, and the laughter of the people around them grew fainter. Even their orders for more drinks grew quieter as he launched into singing the latest masterpiece of *al-Sitt Thuma*:

*You spite me and you abandon me
When my heart begs acceptance you deny me
You torture me and you burn me
You confuse me and you weaken me
And when I complain you berate me
And when I say, "My oppressor, you'll get yours one day,"
You get angry.*

The appreciation was etched on Gamal's face as his eyes closed and his head bobbed in rapture with each stanza. As for the sheikh, his fear of this youthful officer had left him completely. He beamed as though he were dancing in his seat, his fat belly bouncing ecstatically before him in rhythm with the music.

*Shame that you leave and do evil to me
That you forget all that happened to me
I spend my whole life waiting for the day
When you will favor me*

Absentmindedly, Gamal leaned back, his knees thrusting forward until they bumped into the table in front of him, shaking the drinks laid upon it as though they, too, were intoxicated by the song. He muttered an apology and straightened in his chair as Daoud continued singing entrancingly:

*I was patient for years when you rejected me
Endured cruel grief when you avoided me
So one day you might pity me
You forsake me and forget me
And in my distress you have left me
And when I complain you berate me
And when I say, "My oppressor, you'll get yours one day,"
You get angry*

When the flowing melody had finished, life returned to the café as normal in mid-afternoon. Once again, voices rose among the delighted customers, and Daoud asked for a cinnamon tea to soothe his throat after its exertion. After two sips he found himself meandering in a dream in which he saw his country, Egypt, an independent nation once again. No longer would the foreigner be able to impose his will on her soil. Daoud would once again take part in the patriotic labor that he had left behind with the years of his vanished youth. Tomorrow looked down upon him dimly, staring at him from the world of the Unseen. Daoud had watched the faces of Sheikh Hassanein and Captain Gamal Abdel-Nasser as they sat lost in reverie in front of him, and he had kept wondering curiously, what lay hidden for them all in the days to come?



Daoud Abdel-Malek thought a lot upon these ideas for the rest of the day until that evening, when his feet led him to the district of Ibrahimiya. On that freezing night, he had not intended to walk so far, so he stopped. He turned right and left, seeing no living things down the length of the Corniche, its streetlamps surrounded by that faint halo of light. He turned right at the next corner toward *al-Khawaga* Antonelli's Tavern, wandering into the nearly darkened hall that was warmed by the breaths of the drunken patrons and their convivial guffaws. Western music wafted feebly from a gramophone set upon a table of medium height next to the bar. Antonelli was delighted to persuade Daoud to offer his refined entertainment, which captivated all his patrons. As a result, their requests for drinks went on until at dawn. And in return, *al-Khawaga* Antonelli refused to let him pay for what he had consumed.

Daoud took off his checkered scarf and overcoat after drawing the ring from his finger and putting it back in its pocket. He then laid both garments on the chair next to him. He rested his oud against the nearby wall, wanting nothing more than to return to the singing he had done that night. And he never stopped thinking—yet again amazed—about the effect of that magical silver ring.

