

Khairy Shalaby

The Time-Travels of the Man Who Sold Pickles and Sweets



A MODERN ARABIC NOVEL

Translated by Michael Cooperson



The Time-Travels
of the Man
Who Sold Pickles
and Sweets

Khairy Shalaby

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*A Narration Comprising
Events to Dazzle and Astound
Meditations to Divert and Confound
Histories to Edify
And Incidents to Horrify*

*By the Pen of God's Neediest Creature
The Knowing but Unlearned
The Tutored but Unwise
Ibn Shalaby, the Hanafi and Egyptian
The Seller of Pickles and Sweets
May God Guard Us from His Ignorance, Amen!*

Translated by
Michael Cooperson

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CHAPTER 1

The Caliph's Invitation

The Fatimid caliph Mu'izz had sent me a personal invitation to break the Ramadan fast at his table—or his dining carpet, as the invitation put it. The occasion was the first celebration of the holy month of Ramadan in Cairo, or more exactly the first Ramadan to be celebrated in a city called Cairo. Before Mu'izz, no such place had existed. The capital of Egypt had been a town called Fustat, with various extensions built by successive invaders to break with the memory of old regimes and avoid rubbing shoulders with the lower orders. Before long, settlements with names like “the Cantonments” and “the Allotments” had become towns. The towns then merged into the great city of Cairo, which before becoming the capital was simply the district where the ruling Fatimid family had settled.

I had met Mu'izz before. One of my teachers, Ibn Khallikan, had taken me to North Africa. There, in the town of Qayrawan, we visited the Islamic kingdom where Mu'izz was the caliph. I was overwhelmed by the unabashed luxury and ostentation. The mosques were full of marble pillars, and even the people seemed to have something of the marble pillar about them. A few centuries later, I happened to be in modern Cairo—the Cairo of the French and the British—and was introduced to a man named Stanley Lane-Poole, who loved the city and had written a history of the place. He looked at me searchingly and said, “We’ve met before, haven’t we?” I was racking my brains

trying to remember him when he suddenly exclaimed (in Foreignish, naturally), “Got it! It was in North Africa, at Mu‘izz’s court in Qayrawan.”

“How about that!” I exclaimed. We embraced and set off through the old streets and alleys, stopping at the cafés to drink green tea and ginger and smoke a water pipe, and talking all the while of Mu‘izz.

Lane-Poole was a wily foreign gentleman who knew all there was to know about everything. He explained to me—and if you don’t agree, blame him—that the Shi‘i movement had three great achievements to its credit. First, the Shi‘i Qarmatian sect had taken control of the Arabian Peninsula, central Iraq, and Syria in the ninth and tenth centuries. Then the Fatimid caliphate had expanded into North Africa and Egypt. Finally, the doctrines of the Ismailis had penetrated Persia and Lebanon. The Fatimid caliphate, named after Fatima, the wife of Ali ibn Abi Talib and the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, was the most vigorous offshoot of the Shi‘i movement. In the fertile soil of the Berber regions, it had flourished. In the year AD 910, in Qayrawan, the capital of the country now called Tunisia, Fatimid missionaries found, in the person of Ubaydallah, the Mahdi or “rightly guided leader,” a worthy successor to the line of Ali and Fatima. The wily foreign gentleman added that it had taken the Mahdi only two campaigns to bring all of North Africa, from Fez and Marrakesh to the borders of Egypt, under his sway. Our Mu‘izz was the fourth of the Fatimid caliphs descended from the Mahdi. It was he who had conquered Egypt. He was an able, honest, and intelligent man, and a consummately clever politician.

As we sat at a café in Husayn Square eating blancmange—or milk pudding, as you might call it today—the wily foreign gentleman abruptly vanished, doubtless to avoid paying the check. I decided to track him down and chew him out: not because he’d stuck me with the check, but because he’d left without explaining how Cairo was built. When the waiter looked the other way, I popped into the alley, taking care to look like someone who was *not* skipping out on the check but only going to buy something and come back. But I was barely out of my seat before I found myself surrounded by uniformed North African soldiers.

“Strange creature!” they said. “Where do think you’re going?”

“What’s it to you?” I replied. “I’m walking down the alley next to the mosque to buy some cigarettes. Then I’m coming back to pay my bill at the café.”

“Café?” they said. “Bill? The only thing you’ll be paying is the penalty for trespassing on a building site.”

I looked up. To my astonishment, we were standing on a tract of open ground enclosed by a boundary wall. Around us, other walls of solid stone formed squares, rectangles, and circles on the ground. I looked around in dismay.

“My God, where on earth am I?”

A man came forward. He was a Moroccan who looked like a wise old soothsayer. “Son,” he said, “you’re in the same place you were before.”

Dazed, I asked, “What are those mountains, then?”

“That’s Muqattam.”

“What’s that town over there?”

“That’s Fustat and the settlements around it. And those huts over there are the village of Umm Dunayn.”

“If that’s Muqattam,” I asked, “where’s the Salah Salim Freeway? Where’s the City of the Dead? Where’s Darrasa? The Mosque of Husayn? Where am I?”

He smiled and patted me kindly on the shoulder. “Come along with me.”

I followed him across what in my mind was still an alleyway. A short distance away we passed the foundation of a building, then another and another. We were approaching what looked like a camp. It extended from the slopes of the Muqattam Hills down to the area that a short time ago had been occupied by al-Azhar Mosque. The area now contained an enormous orchard with a foundation trench dug around it. Scattered all around were tents of elegant appearance, with soldiers and officials everywhere. We passed an old man with a long beard. He was carrying a reed pen, a calamus, an inkpot, and a sheaf of papers. Some of the soldiers were arguing with him, but he was standing his ground, smiling gently and pausing from time to time to write something down. I recognized him: it was Maqrizi, author of the still-famous *Topography*. Wanting to show my companion that I knew people in high places, I called out without breaking my stride, “Hey, Maqrizi! How are ya?”

He nodded to me as gently as a shining star. Despite my predicament, I had the effrontery to shout, “If you need anything, just let me know!”

He called back, “Now that you mention it, I do.”

My knees went weak. What if he needed money? Or someone to take his side in the argument he was having?

But he said only, “If you have any information about this particular plot of land, dictate it to me. I’ve kept track of everyone who’s set foot here going back as many years as I can count, but it never hurts to double-check.”

I stood there smiling at him like an imbecile and let the Moroccan sooth-sayer drag me away.

We walked along a path lined with potted plants and armed soldiers who saluted us as we passed. It led us to a cavernous space that looked as if it were built of marble but was actually made of tent-cloth, with carpets on the ground. The Moroccan turned a corner and I followed anxiously behind him. Suddenly we were face to face with the supreme commander himself. No one had to tell us who he was; it was clear without his having to say a word. The Moroccan bowed and then pointed to me.

“On the first of Ramadan^{AH 358*}, this individual was apprehended sneaking onto palace grounds.”

“Palace?” I squawked. “What palace? I swear to God there was no palace.”

The supreme commander laughed, looked over at me, and sat back in his gilded chair. To my great relief he said, “I hereby issue a general amnesty and command my troops to cease and desist from any and all hostile activity, in deference to a request by the women of Egypt, who have petitioned me for mercy. So tell me, you there: what mischief have you gotten yourself into?” He smiled.

“So far so good,” I thought to myself. Then, out loud, I said, “General Gohar, the Sicilian, am I right?”

He nodded. I knelt before him and said, “I beg you to forgive me if I’ve done anything wrong! I’m a vagabond wandering through time, and I come and go as I please.”

He beckoned me to get up and then pointed me to a chair so large that I nearly disappeared into it. With a glance he dismissed the Moroccan sooth-sayer. He passed a hand across his short beard and rubbed his face. It was a big, round, ruddy face, resolute and proud. “In the name of God!” he pronounced. “There is no power or strength except in God, the High and Mighty One!” He fiddled with his worry beads. Then he seemed to recall my presence.

“Are you fasting?” he asked.

“Happy Ramadan!” I cried.

“If you’re not a Muslim, don’t be shy: ask for something to eat and drink.”

“No, Mr. General,” I said, as embarrassed as I could be. “I’m a monotheist and a Muslim.”

“God be praised,” he said in his awkward foreign accent.

A chamberlain, dragging the train of his best-grade baize gown, came in with several rolls of paper under his arm. He came up to Gohar and unrolled the

* See page 261 for date concordances

papers, which turned out to be plans for palaces, minarets, gates, colonnades, and balconies. The two men promptly forgot all about me. Gohar looked over the papers, comparing the plans. Finally, he announced with a scowl, "The builders' drawings don't match the ones prepared by our master Mu'izz!"

"The differences are minor," the chamberlain replied. "These are construction plans and they need to be detailed."

In the pleading tone of someone caught outside of his sphere of professional competence, Gohar explained that he was committed to following the plans of their master Mu'izz, who had designed this city down to the last period and comma.

"We're committed, too," said the man. "The only modifications we've made are due to the nature of the site. They're only minor changes."

"With God's blessing, then!" said Gohar, taking the pen from the chamberlain and signing one of the papers. Then he spread it out, giving me a chance to take a closer look. Delighted, I exclaimed, "That's al-Azhar Mosque! It looks just like it!"

Ignoring me, he rolled it up and unrolled another, signed it, and spread it out. It was a plan for an extremely impressive and elaborate palace. Even more delighted, I cried out, "That must be the Great Eastern Palace!"

Gohar rolled up the plan and said to the chamberlain, "That will be the seat of the Fatimid caliphate." He made a gesture of thanks and the chamberlain departed, crossing paths with another chamberlain, who was not so splendidly dressed. Gohar gave him an uneasy glance.

"So, what's happened?"

With a bow, the less splendidly dressed chamberlain replied, "We've come up with a clever solution to the long-distance communication problem."

Leaning back imperiously in his seat, Gohar asked him what it was.

"The scientists and astrologers posted in the Muqattam Hills are working out the best time to start construction . . ."

"That's what I want to know!" Gohar interrupted. "When does the work start? Have you settled on a time?"

The less splendidly dressed chamberlain continued in a thin, faltering voice, "My lord, the scientists and astronomers are still working on it."

"On what?"

"On choosing the time."

"Which will be when?"

"Whenever the astronomers determine that the ascendant is auspicious."

"And when will they do that?"

“When Constellation A gets close to Constellation B, or when Planet X enters the sign of Y: astrological mumbo-jumbo, as if I have a clue.”

Gohar growled to himself, as if admitting that he had no idea either. Then he asked what the clever solution was.

The less splendidly dressed chamberlain said, “The problem is that the builders have to start building the moment the astronomers issue the order. Even a second’s worth of delay might be fatal. But how to communicate the order quickly enough?”

“How?” I exclaimed, drowning out Gohar, who was asking the same question.

The less splendidly dressed chamberlain replied, “That’s what we solved.”

“How?”

“As you know, there are no buildings around us except the Monastery of the Bones and no vegetation except Kafur’s Garden.”

“Right.”

Suddenly curious, I jumped up on the chair to look out the window. “No kidding! So that’s Kafur’s Garden, from here to Ataba . . . and it ends at the Caliph’s Canal, which is Port Said Street now. So what you’re calling Umm Dunayn is what I call Ezbekiya Pond!”

Gohar was now standing next to me looking out another one of the round windows. The less splendidly dressed chamberlain was pointing and explaining. “We laid stakes down in a square, twelve hundred yards on a side. Then we ran cords between the stakes and hung bells from the cords.”

“Why bells?”

“When the ascendant is in the right place, the astronomers will pull the cord at their end. The bells will ring, and the workers will start working.”

“What a clever idea,” Gohar and I exclaimed in unison. He gestured at the window and sat down again. Breathless, I collapsed back into my seat. The less splendidly dressed chamberlain suddenly noticed me. Alarmed, he glanced around, as if searching for a broom to swat me with. I thought about jumping up to frighten him and then making a run for it, but then remembered I had a personal invitation from the caliph Mu‘izz. My temper rising, I sat up in my seat, but Gohar was already saying to the chamberlain, “Don’t worry about him; he’s a perfectly harmless Egyptian.”

“With an invitation from His Majesty the Caliph,” I interrupted. “I’m breaking the Ramadan fast with him today at the palace.” I started rummaging

through my pockets for the invitation, but Gohar stopped me. "Calm down, calm down! The palace where you're going hasn't been built yet. You're at least four years early."

"But it's Ramadan now!"

"Break your fast with us if you want."

"No, thank you, sir," I replied. "Sorry to have been a nuisance. I'll be back in four years."

"Have it your way, then."

I was getting ready to leave when all at once the bells began rattling and ringing in a wave that spread to the horizon and rolled back like a monstrous ululation. Gohar jumped up joyfully and embraced the less splendidly dressed chamberlain. Everyone was hooting and hollering, and the sounds of hammering and digging and chanting filled the air.

"You fellow there," said Gohar to me. "You came at the time of the lucky star. By God, I'll see to it that you're well rewarded!" He invited me to sit next to him at the Ramadan meal, and to accept some gifts. I danced with delight, thrilled to have been present at the birth of my beloved city. Meanwhile, a crowd of distinguished-looking people were pouring into the forecourt and lining up to sign what must have been the guestbook. I recognized the historian Ibn Taghribirdi, the biographer Ibn Khallikan, the chronicler Ibn Abdel Hakam, Maqrizi, the historian Abdel Rahman Zaki, the Fatimid scholar Hasan Ibrahim Hasan, the architect Hassan Fathy, the novelist Naguib Mahfouz, the critic Husayn Fawzi, the architectural historian Suad Mahir, and many other friends and acquaintances, all of whom were doing their best not to look at me sitting next to Gohar the Sicilian, commander of the army of Mu'izz, at the moment the ground was broken to build the city of Cairo.

But the celebration was short-lived. All at once everyone was scowling and an angry clamor was heard outside. Hoofbeats approached and a man came in. "It's a disaster!" he cried. "A calamity! How could this happen?" He burst into tears. We stared at him, shocked at his disheveled finery.

"Chief Astrologer! What's the matter?"

"A catastrophe! The construction started at the worst possible moment!"

Gohar rose, gasping. "What?"

Sobbing, the astronomer explained that at the moment construction began, the ascendant was in a position that was not at all auspicious—quite unlucky, as a matter of fact.

"How?" said Gohar angrily.

“Mars the Conqueror was rising!”

Gohar stamped his foot. “The Conqueror? So why did you order them to start working?”

The astronomer stamped his foot too. “We didn’t! We didn’t lift a finger.”

“So who did?”

“A crow! That’s right, a stupid crow! It couldn’t find anywhere in the whole world to land at that moment except on one of the stakes. Of course, he liked it there, and had to start hopping around, and set off all the bells!”

An indescribably mournful gloom settled over Gohar. His Herculean body collapsed on the throne, dead-eyed and lifeless. I started thinking about how best to sneak away. But then a delegation of scholars, somber and self-possessed, entered the room, dragging the trains of their long robes with a great show of dignity. They bowed before Gohar, who ignored them. Their leader came forward and, doing his best to play down the disaster, declared, “Whatever happened is by the will of God. Let it be! We can still be hopeful. Mars is rising, so let us call the new city Cairo, ‘the victorious.’”

In a voice that sounded as if it were coming from the bottom of a well, Gohar said, “Cairo?”

“Yes. That way the bad omen might turn out to be a good one after all.”

A chorus of voices rose in agreement.

“Not a bad idea!”

“A good omen after all!”

“God willing!”

Gohar asked if it wouldn’t be better to stop work and wait for a better ascendant.

“That would be a bad omen in itself, my lord,” the scholar explained. “The ascendant was unlucky, but tearing down what we just built wouldn’t be auspicious either.”

A spark of life reappeared in Gohar’s eye. He gestured as if to say that he was willing to try. The sages turned back to the crowd outside, calling out to reassure them. The dignitaries pushed forward again to sign the guest book. There waiting his turn was Stanley Lane-Poole. Gohar was distracted, so I scrambled away and headed for the wily foreign gentleman.

“Caught you! Come here, you!”

I leapt into the crowd, seized Lane-Poole, and whispered in his ear, “I paid the café check!”

He smiled at me, evidently having no idea what I was talking about. Then he pulled me aside and we lost our bearings in the crowd. A moment later I came to my senses and found myself wandering around the Mosque of Husayn. It was after sunset, and I was alone. I realized I was standing amid the colonnades of the caliph's Great Eastern Palace.

CHAPTER 2

Too Late for Everything except the Demolition

I looked at my watch and realized that my dinner with Mu‘izz was one thousand and thirty-eight years away: ten and a half centuries, more or less. “No problem,” I thought. “I’ll take a stroll around al-Husayn and have some tea at Fishawi’s.” I wasn’t thinking of the modern café by that name, which is nothing to write home about. To find a seat in the old version, in all its glory, all I have to do is squat against the wall. Buildings, you see, are more than buildings: they’re made of layer upon age-old layer of indelible images. I, the Son of Shalaby, can choose any image and live inside it whenever I want—except, friend, when I tumble down the well of time. When that happens, only a passing vision can pull me out.

When my mint tea and water pipe arrived, I let my eyes wander along the wooden partition worked in tiny V-shaped figures. I was the only one seated in the alcove. The café was trying to sell a past that was frozen into remnants of decoration and some old chairs. I slid my chair to a spot next to the door with a good view to the outside. I could see half-naked tourists carrying maps and cameras; Nazira sitting on the ancient couch where she was telling a little girl’s fortune from her coffee grounds, as she seemed to have been doing for a thousand years; men selling semolina rolls, paint, electric fans, and imports from America and Japan; and the Safiri beggars. The Safiris were named after their patriarch, Safar, who reportedly came here as a soldier in the armies of

someone-or-other and settled down to father a passel of children who did not believe in putting themselves to the trouble of working. Their great-grandfather was supposedly the first to take up begging as a profession and make a living at it. Looking at them, it struck me that the ones offering their goods and services were beggars too. Meanwhile, my ears were under assault from three adjoining music stores. Each was playing a different tape and trying to attract customers by drowning the others out. Suddenly I didn't want to be in Fishawi's any more: I was tired of being harassed by people who wanted to beg from me or sell me something. Slouching past the shops full of gold bangles, souvenirs, and trinkets, I submerged myself in the flood of wide-eyed tourists, feeling that I was, if not a work of art, then certainly a piece of work; and that one of them might be tricked into buying me.

Suddenly the crowd grew thicker, pressing shoulder to shoulder and bearing me down. I shrieked like a woman but no one responded. Trampled mercilessly underfoot, I hit and bit at people's shins, clearing a space big enough to wiggle through to a less crowded spot where I managed to get to my feet and start moving again through the seething masses of people. I was stunned: when I had fallen down, no one had paid the slightest attention. Had things gotten that bad?

Then I noticed that everyone was dressed in the clothing of another age. Around me was a carnival of pantaloons, Mamluk turbans, Egyptian gallabiyas, and Moroccan abayas.

Pulled along by the throng, I stumbled into a vast courtyard between two palaces grander than any I had seen before. "This must be the famous square between the palaces," I thought. "The one I'm walking next to now is the Great Eastern Palace; and the Lesser Western Palace is the one on the other side of the square. But what are all these people doing here?"

Transformed into a marketplace, the square was swarming with commoners and vendors of all kinds, sitting in front of their displays of meat, pastries, and fruit. Though it was night, the torches and oil lamps made it seem broad daylight. To judge by the goods for sale, it was Ramadan. So much was clear, too, from the festive cheer, which lit up people's faces despite the choking crowds that threw men together with donkeys and grantees with muleteers. Spotting a circle walled off by bodies and chairs and benches, I made my way over and saw a poet playing a rebec and reciting the adventures of some hero: Antar, perhaps, or Abu Zayd. In another circle, young men performed acrobatic tricks to the laughter and applause of the spectators. I noticed that people were gawking at me because of my suit and

tie and Samsonite briefcase. Seeing someone who looked as bewildered as I was, I stopped him and asked, "Brother, why are people lining up here? Is this a wedding or a funeral?"

"That's what I'd like to know, too."

"Who are you?"

"Muhibb al-Din Ahmad, son of the Chief Judge, Imad al-Din Ahmad al-Karaki, just arrived from Karak."

"What year is this?"

"792."

I had ended up in the wrong time. I walked away, wondering how to get back to where I had come from. But the crowd pulled me along, this time to a festive tent full of watermelons and a throng as big as any in late-twentieth-century Egypt. Sitting nearby was Maqrizi. I thought he might be waiting for a watermelon to take home to his family, but he turned out to be questioning a boy who looked like a vagrant. I asked what he wanted from him.

"He and one of his friends work in the stables," said Maqrizi. "On this blessed Ramadan night, they stole some twenty watermelons and approximately thirty wedges of cheese."

"Do the melons and cheese belong to you?"

"No, I'm only asking him how he did the deed, so I can write it down."

"You," I said, "are a truly great man."

He looked at me suspiciously. "Didn't I see you being arrested by Gohar's troops?"

I admitted it.

"So what do you want, exactly?"

"I have an invitation to break the fast with Mu'izz, the Fatimid caliph."

"On the occasion of what?"

"The first Ramadan to be celebrated in Cairo."

"Go back the way you came," he said. "At the moment, you're walking along a line between the two palaces. The Fatimid caliphate has fallen to the Ayyubids, and the square's been thrown open to the public, as you can see."

He must have realized that I was a person of some importance, especially after I balanced my Samsonite briefcase on my knee and opened it with an impressive click. I brandished the gold-engraved invitation card from Mu'izz, thinking that even if the visit didn't work and I found myself busted flat I could sell the gilt to a goldsmith. That's why I kept it at arm's length and why my hand trembled when Maqrizi reached for it, hoping to read it: the card itself was so splendid that I should be able to pawn it for cash if I had to.

Maqrizi smiled. "Where were you before you came here?"

"I was coming from the Mosque of Husayn, going through the gate on the other side past the souvenir shops toward Mu'izz Street. The next thing I knew, I was here."

"Good enough," he said. "See that big gate?"

"Yes."

"That's the Daylam Gate. It overlooks the courtyard called Bashtak Palace Square. If you walk through the courtyard, away from the Storehouse of Banners, you'll end up at Husayn. It's actually right behind you, but there are a good many years in between. From the Daylam Gate you can go through to the Saffron Cemetery Gate, which is the burial ground for the caliphs and their families. By the way, the Saffron Cemetery is going to be the site of the Caravanserai of al-Khalili. Have you heard of it?"

"I've never seen the caravanserai, but in my time Khan al-Khalili is world-famous."

He nodded and then said as if it were only a day between, "All that's left is the name. One more for Egypt to remember!" He continued, "Anyway, between the Daylam Gate and the Saffron Cemetery Gate are the seven passages the Caliph uses on the bonfire nights to reach the observation tower on al-Azhar Mosque, where he and his family sit and watch the fires and the crowds. You can go through the Saffron Cemetery Gate to Reeky Gate."

"Where's that?" I exclaimed.

He pointed to a grand old gate and said, "That's it."

"The gateway's still there in my time, too! I'll stand in front of it and hold on—maybe it'll pull me from the bottom of time up to the surface. From there I can come back down the well the right way."

Smiling, Maqrizi asked if I was invited to break the fast. When I said I was, he asked me if I knew what "Reeky Gate" meant. I said I didn't.

"It means 'Kitchen Gate,'" he said. I looked toward it longingly. Maqrizi tugged at me gently and sat me down at his side. Then he pulled out a pocket-knife—not a switchblade, which would have been illegal—with a handle elegantly decorated with Quranic verses and radiant Islamic designs. He rolled one of the watermelons over, tapped on it like an expert, stuck the knife into it and cut twice, then drew out an enormous slice and offered it to me with the suggestion that it would cool me down. I buried my whole face in it, indifferent to the mess it would make of my suit, tie, and shirt collar. As he sedately carved out a piece for himself, Maqrizi asked, "Don't they have watermelon in your time?"

"No, by God," I said, "only something like it, that goes by the same name."

"May God rest the soul of Ibn Arabi, who wrote: 'When Jupiter enters Gemini, food becomes dear in Egypt. The rich become few and the poor many, and death takes from them its tithe.'"

"So when does Jupiter enter Gemini?" I asked.

"Every thirty solar years," he said. "It stays there about thirty months."

"Ibn Arabi was right about some things," I said, "but the more poor people there are, the more rich people too—and the higher their property values."

"In that case," said Maqrizi, "Cairo's sign of Ares must still be ascendant."

"It's almost time," I said, "for me to meet Mu'izz!"

"I happen to know that Mu'izz arrived here at his palace on the seventh of Ramadan, AH 362."

"Now I can get there with no trouble," I said, writing the date in my appointment book. "I'll just take the direct bus."

I bid him farewell. Embarrassed at the condition of my suit, I tried cleaning it off with a handkerchief, but discovered that all the dust in Cairo had come off my face onto the cloth. Laying it on my wrist, I folded it over to get the clean side up; but every time I did, I would start sweating again and have to wipe my face, which dirtied the handkerchief all over again. The prospect of facing Mu'izz's guards in that condition was a depressing one. I might even be arrested and interrogated by the police, with unpleasant consequences. Leaning against the Reeky Gate, I ran a hand over it. It stood firm and strong: not a relic yet. People were staring at me, some suspicious, others amused.

"He must be a Crusader," said a young donkey-driver.

"Fool!" said a tripe-seller pushing his cart. "He's a Turk."

A peddler girl joined in: "No, he's a Daylami!"

Poking at her with his staff, an old man launched into a rant: "Turks, Daylamis, Zuwayla, Franks, Persians: there's no way to know where anyone's from anymore!"

The peddler girl stopped in the middle of the crowd and turned to face the old man—and me, too. She was beautiful: a product of Turkish, French, Greek, Persian, Caucasian, or Ethiopian blood, or most likely of all of them together, and a descendant of one of the former palace slave women and an emir, perhaps. Looking me over, she pronounced with formidable authority, "Poor thing! He must have been captured by slave-traders centuries ago and wandered off on his own. Are you still lost, sweetie? Don't worry, someone here will give you a place to sleep and bread to eat. What a city: cruel and

tender all at once! This jinx of an old man thinks I'm an ignorant girl or a common whore, but he should know that I'm a lady of the day, not only of the night; and I can read and write, too. All those kings and emperors started out as slaves, but they fought and plot and schemed until they came to power—and turned into bloodsuckers!”

The old man curled his lower lip in distaste, brandished his stick, and said, “Get away from me, you she-devil! Go back to your house in Dar al-Ratli, or wherever the hell you live.”

With a sprightly bow, she said, “All of Cairo is my home. You spend the night in any one of a hundred open mosques, but I spend the night in the hundreds of eyes enchanted by my beauty and the hundreds of hearts moved by my plight. My plight is theirs and theirs is mine; and how pretty a plight I have!”

She turned, making the light sparkle on her costly frock, and disappeared into the crowd. The old man shook me, saying, “My name . . . my name is . . .” When he saw that I was paying no attention to him, he shook the stick in my face and walked away, muttering to himself. When he vanished, he seemed to have given the whole scene permission to vanish as well. For an instant, I could see nothing, though my head was filled with the echoes of sweet voices softly chanting songs of Spain.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself leaning against Reeky Gate, which was now a ruin. The map of the reality I knew was popping into being bit by bit in front of me. Soon enough I found the bend in the alley that led to the Mosque of Husayn, a few steps away.

Cursing my heavy briefcase, I staggered across the square. I bumped into Ibrahim Mansur, who, walking with his cane, was pointing out the sights to two foreign scholars, giving a commentary that itself required a commentary. I hoped to dodge him, afraid that he would ask me—right in front of the foreigners—to pay him back five pounds I didn't want to return because he had forced me to borrow it at a time when I didn't need it. Fortunately, I spotted Abdel Rahman al-Sharqawi—in shirt, trousers, and flip-flops—hurrying toward the mosque with his prayer beads. Nervous about the five pounds, I started after him, but Ibrahim hooked me with his cane and stopped me in my tracks. He then launched into a speech of significant length, accompanied by frenzied gestures, and sputtering in his earnest effort to convey the point that he had discovered the finest and most charming of authentic Egyptian coffeehouses, located “right here,” as he put it, pointing in the direction of nothing in particular.

“Where is it, exactly?” I asked. “Just so I know how far it is.”

He told me it was in Atuf, and I told him that was a fine place for it to be. Atuf was a district next to Gamaliya. Originally the home of the palace servants, it had been named after their chief.

“I know how to get into the palace through the servants’ door,” I said to Ibrahim.

“So you’ve found your rightful place after all!” he said, and then translated his witticism for the foreigners, who laughed. I did not, perhaps because the remark had struck too close to home. But I did decide to keep back a bit of news I had been meaning to share with him: that he had been named a biographer of Cairo from the moment he had begun working on a book about Naguib Mahfouz and set out to explore the places where the writer had grown up.

We plunged into the alleys of Atuf. It turned out that Ibrahim already knew the news I had decided to keep from him. It also turned out that the two foreigners knew more than the two of us put together. The new houses complemented the old ones wonderfully, even if the old ones looked like authentic originals and the new constructions like ivy climbing the sides of ancient trees.

We had just passed a narrow street leading to the Bayt al-Qadi district when Ibrahim suddenly fell behind. Catching up with us a moment later, he claimed to have been caught off guard by the sight of Naguib Mahfouz sitting at a café and smoking a water pipe amid a crowd of master poultry-sellers, butchers, and other dignitaries. The gathering would certainly be well supplied with good jokes and good tobacco. In any case, said Ibrahim, he should certainly excuse himself long enough to greet him because it would be rude to pretend not to have seen him. He vanished down the narrow street, tapping with his cane like an errant warrior. I was left alone with the two foreigners, who looked at me, hoping in vain that I would say something. I was rescued by Ibn Abdel Zahir, the friend of an important Western historian who will be introduced to you later.

“Hello, Abdel Zahir!”

“Hello, Ibn Shalaby! How’s it going?”

I told him I was fine, and he swore that wild horses couldn’t stop him from treating me to a water pipe filled with cinnamon tobacco. I replied that since he had sworn an oath, I had better accept. Oh yes: would the foreigners like to come along? They declined politely, and so I made my escape.

I let Ibn Abdel Zahir lead the way, and suddenly we found ourselves in one of the most beautiful districts in Cairo. It was full of great mansions,

bathhouses, markets, and mosques beyond counting. All of the locals were dark-complexioned and had something grand and proud about them; even the people in the street seemed to exude a quiet self-satisfaction. Ibn Abdel Zahir explained that all of them were relatives of Atuf.

“Who exactly is this Atuf?” I asked.

“A palace servant, and the attendant of Tawila, called Sitt al-Mulk, the sister of the caliph Hakim, the grandson of Mu‘izz.”

Ibn Abdel Zahir gestured for me to look up. Spilling out of a particularly distinguished-looking passageway into the street was a great procession of guards and attendants. Like a cat digging its claws into a wall, I climbed to the top of a lovely mashrabiya window. From there I could see a short, dark-skinned man who must have been a pasha, or something even higher, dressed in a brocade gown that scattered points of limpid light, preceded by a cloud of perfumed air, and walking with great deliberation. A crowd of relatives and passers-by smiled at him proudly, some even turning their heads and bowing as he passed. Following a signal from Ibn Abdel Zahir, I climbed down and we set off in the wake of the black pasha.

“That’s Atuf,” he said. “He’s heading for the palace.”

We stayed close behind him. I felt a surge of other eras close to our own, and was astonished to find that the present aura of old age was distinct even in the shadow of that far greater antiquity. We passed through an enormous gateway and I asked Ibn Abdel Zahir what it was called.

“The Gate of the Roofed Passage,” he intoned. “On the Days of Immolation and the Festival of Ghadir Khumm, it is the custom to slaughter animals here and distribute the meat to the poor. In the year 516, the caliph Amer slaughtered 1,746 animals here and at the Manhar in just three days. Through this gate, twelve she-camels, eighteen head of cattle, fifteen water buffaloes, and one thousand and eight rams are taken in to feed the palace, the vizierate, the officials, and the attendants, and every day the offal of the camels and goats is given away in charity.”

I told Abdel Zahir that the stench of the time that clung to me, or that I had brought with me, was coming to the surface; I could already catch the smell of Khurunfish. He told me that the Western Palace extended to where Khurunfish would be. Then he looked at a compass he had taken out of the palm-leaf basket he carried on his back. I asked him what time it was.

“It’s Sunday evening, the eleventh of Safar, 401.”

At that moment we crossed a passage paved in good-quality genuine marble, lined with banana trees, henna, and other plants I couldn’t name.

Alabaster walls, some high, some low, were half-submerged in flowering branches suffused by sunbeams and a silvery glow. The trees stretched as far as the eye could see, their numberless branches concealing palaces, some close together, others set apart.

“What is this place?” I asked. “Paradise?”

“Have you forgotten,” he answered, his voice sounding far away, “that the Lesser Western Palace includes Kafur’s Garden?”

“But I’m trying to get to the Great Eastern Palace,” I said. “I’m invited to break the fast with the Fatimid caliph!”

Ibn Abdel Zahir promised he would take me there after we visited Sitt al-Mulk on a piece of important business. This palace, he said, had been built by Nizar, that is, the caliph Aziz, the father of Hakim, for his daughter Sitt al-Mulk, Hakim’s oldest sister.

Suddenly Ibn Abdel Zahir’s voice disappeared. I looked around, but he was gone. Afraid to call to him and draw attention to myself, I began flailing blindly around the palace garden, or the garden palace. From out of nowhere came a burst of laughter and I shuddered in terror. Then I realized that I was passing a balcony that overlooked a fountain. In the fountain were marble figures of animals shooting jets of water into a vast basin of colored alabaster. Peering down from the balcony was a bouquet of pretty faces, standing like roses piled together, stems out of sight. One of them suddenly appeared in front of me and asked with a gentle smile, “Are you a qasri like us?”

“What’s a qasri?” I asked.

“A palace servant.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m the new eunuch.”

She laughed, as did her companions on the balcony.

“Who are all of you?” I asked.

“We’re the slaves of Sitt al-Mulk. There are eight thousand of us!”

I gasped. Then she did too, before bolting in terror, crying, “It’s Hakim . . . he’s here!”

I dropped to the ground and started crawling like a snake flushed out of hiding. Picking a spot on the basin wall that would camouflage me, I hid in the shadows and then looked around for Hakim. He was coming out of a doorway that matched the design of the rest of the place but looked like the mouth of a cavern. I committed its location and its appearance to memory. The Caliph had barely reached the entrance of the right wing of the palace when Atuf appeared, greeting him with a majestic bow. Hakim raised his finger in an equally majestic gesture of dismissal. Atuf stepped aside but

then set off after him. Hakim stopped abruptly, turned around, and looked at him, with a forced smile that looked like another gesture of dismissal. Atuf made an exaggerated gesture of deference to the Caliph's orders, but then, with a glum expression on his face, continued to march along behind him. Again Hakim stopped, stamping his foot in exasperation. This time Atuf backed off.

I, meanwhile, had seized the opportunity to jump up on the wall that ran alongside the Caliph's path, flitting along like a phantom from the future. I followed the wall until I reached a set of marble steps that led up to a part of the grounds where the twittering of sparrows and the strains of languid music wafted through the air. The walls were concealed by velvet drapes and the figures of guardsmen were visible between the drapes and along the sides of the court.

Hakim walked up to an enclosure in the center and cleared his throat. A blinding light appeared in the doorway and with it Sitt al-Mulk, who stepped toward us with the grace of a gazelle and a great air of nobility. She greeted Hakim with a smile as bright as the world and he nodded to her in a majestic gesture of esteem. I realized that he was performing a daily ritual and that he and Sitt al-Mulk enjoyed a relationship of particular affection. When he turned to leave, I was able to get a good look at him. He had piercing blue eyes and a long, sharp-featured face that bore an expression of cruelty. He walked on and then disappeared into a secret door I could not see clearly.

Going back the way I had come, I found myself in the anteroom of the palace, face to face with the servant—that is, the black pasha, Atuf. He was walking toward Kafur's Garden when men armed with swords emerged from the crowds of qasriya—that is, the ranks of palace servants. They surrounded him and raised their weapons, stopping him in his tracks. Then one of them stepped forward and beheaded him. Another picked up the head and wrapped it in a black cloth. Two others lifted the corpse and carried it out of sight. Then the whole group disappeared.

Breathless, I ran alongside the walls like a shaft of light from a closing window. The garden was filling up with thousands of stars that shone only there. Using them as a guide, I found my way back to the doorway that looked like the mouth of a cavern. From the outside it looked dark, but when I went through it I found the interior lit by dozens of chandeliers and the walls adorned with flowerpots. Beyond the door was a long, crowded passageway, supplied with fresh air that made it feel as breezy as the seaside in Alexandria. This, I realized, was the tunnel that connected the two palaces.

Here the caliph would walk or ride whenever he felt like visiting the Caliph's Canal—which, in our time, is Port Said Street.

The tunnel felt so safe and enchanting that I didn't want it to end, but, like all good things, it did, and there I was, deep inside the Great Eastern Palace. As soon as I stuck my head through the doorway an alarm bell rang and the sound of boots filled the air. But the tunnel had infused me with a force of character that enabled me to face the soldiers with majestic equanimity. I pointed at the one who seemed to be in charge and ordered him to clear his men from my path. Then, in a tone that implied I already know the answer, I asked him what was going on.

"Sir, we've got an emergency situation here. We've got all the palaces under control, and now we're making an inventory of everything: furniture, clothing, money, jewels, precious objects, and slaves, male and female."

Annoyed, I thought to myself: "O Lord! Here I meant to attend the opening of the palace, and instead I'm here for the demolition!"

In a tone as disapproving as I could make it, I asked the officer, "Who are all of you?"

Dubiously he replied, "We serve our master, the Sultan Saladin. His orders are to confiscate everything in the palaces and evict the Fatimid family."

"Hmm, yes, Saladin," I said, nodding. "So I wasn't so far off: this is the coming of the Ayyubid dynasty!"

He nodded back. I smiled at him, saying, "It's the Ayyubids I want, so make way!"

He stepped back smartly but asked, "Who might you be, sir?"

Turning back slightly, I said, "I'm with the inventory team."

He bowed almost to the ground, then caught up with me, whispering as if we were old friends, "If it's not too much trouble, sir, could you save me something, even just a ring with a gemstone in it, as a souvenir?"

"Sure, no problem," I told him. "Anything you like. I'll do my best!"