

Which of the Two Is the Sinner?

Misr al-Fatat, 19 October 1909

Chapter One: Between Tears and Sighs

He spends the hours of the night and most of the day between a heart run dry, a tear that will not cease, and a body that trembles; a gasping breath and a burning sigh, a blazing ember and a pounding heart, the fire of a sleepless eye, turbulent cares, and a bewildered soul; between a painful past and a dark future — silent but for scattered words that rush to my heart and stir what lies in ambush there, rousing what is buried, words that a tongue can scarcely stammer out ... Ah! Alas! Would that I! But I ...

Yet only days ago he was still able to go out to the outskirts of Cairo, or to the bank of the Nile, there to ease his worry and console his grief; but now he has taken to his bed, unable to move, unable to rise.

*He has become like the eagle whose fledglings have flown —
when he seeks to take wing, he is told: 'Fall.'*

Have mercy, O God, on this young man! What has he done? What could his sin possibly be? He has not yet reached the age of twenty-three, and has borne none of life's burdens heavy enough to wear down his back or weigh upon his shoulders. No love has wasted him thin, no passion has made him reckless; he complains of no particular ailment, and yet he has confounded the physicians.

Have mercy, O God! He supports two parents and two brothers — who will provide for them if death should soon snatch him from among them? Have mercy, O God! Shall this supple branch wither, shall this blooming flower fade, shall the grave claim this fine young man, shall the earth embrace this noble soul, after he had been the very picture of perfection in form and character? He was of striking appearance, handsome countenance, radiant to behold, well spoken of, pure of soul, upright in conduct, knowing no evil and inclined to none — save for a single lapse that was the root of his calamity and the source of his ordeal; a fault, if not a small one, for which the youthfulness of his years was the best advocate.

A sin, if unforgivable, that he did not desire and did not commit willingly; an offence, if it was a grave one, brought upon him only by his own good looks and the wickedness of women. O God, and O witnesses of our age! Young minds, souls weak against lightness of spirit and beauty of face, the eagerness of wanton women pressing upon them, and the negligence of fathers who look away from them — what, then, are they to do? The reader may well ask of this young man, whose soul was clear of defilement and purified of false morals: how could he stumble, how could he be brought so low? But if he considers that a strength of evil lurks within every soul, however good, and is stirred up by outside influences whenever the love of good fails to overcome them, he will find an excuse for the young man, and ask instead after those influences — and I undertake to answer for them on his behalf.

Chapter Two: Debauchery after Chastity

This youth grew up in the villages of the countryside as the poor grow up, and it never occurred to his ignorant father to send him to a kuttāb or a school to cultivate his mind; so, like his peers, he knew no claim upon him greater than filling his belly with food and his eyelids with sleep, and felt no duty heavier than driving the bleating flock out to his father's field each morning, then bringing it back to the fold each evening. When he came of age, this hardship no longer suited him, nor did this roughness agree with him, so he set out for Cairo, and there entered the service of a great man who adopted him and gave him generous lodging, and who, once he had been tested and proven, lifted the veil upon the privacy of his household — so that the youth came and went as though he shared in the life of the mansion's own people. Yet this generosity did not spoil him or incline him toward idleness; he carried out his service in the best manner, his resolve keen and his energy ever fresh.

It never once occurred to him that an eye within the mansion was watching him — but with a gaze other than the one he knew; it never occurred to him that a heart within the mansion was fond of him — but with a fondness other than the one he was used to; indeed, it never occurred to him that a soul within the mansion was enamoured of him, awake, and dreamed of him, asleep. Were it not for modesty, I would say outright: it never occurred to him that the lady of the mansion desired him.

He felt none of this, being a servant who would never imagine himself rising to such a rank, so that no watch of the night ever passed without him lost in sweet sleep upon his bed. Indeed, had he known anything of it, he would have denied it utterly, for no one knew better than he the lady's place beside her lord, and he held fast in memory the man's kindness toward him, his trust in him, and the charge entrusted to him. But evil works upon the soul more swiftly than good, and the soul, for all its hatred of evil, is more affected by it than it is, for all its love of good, affected by good — so it was not long before some gesture from his lady struck the youth, and the promptings of corruption began to toy with his heart, until, before long, the threads were joined and the bonds drawn tight.

*And there came to pass what I shall now relate —
think ill of it, then, and await from me the news.*

One night the youth remained in his master's service as usual until he had finished serving his food and drink, and his master rode off to wherever he spent his nights, being one of those men who frequent their own house only by day. As the youth was making his way back to where he took his own meal, a servant-girl stopped him and said in a whisper: 'Answer your lady; she is calling for you.' When he stood before her, she asked him, smiling: 'Has your master eaten?' He answered: 'Yes, and he has gone out.' She said: 'Then you mean to eat now?' He answered: 'If my lady has no need of me.' She said: 'Sit at the table as you always do, but without food this time — for tonight you will eat with me, two hours from now.'

At this the youth showed some bewilderment, and the lady pretended not to notice, so he went out torn between joy and dread. After a while he was summoned to his lady; when she saw him she said, smiling: 'More than two hours have passed.' He answered: 'Yes.' She said: 'Then why did you not come?' He made to answer, but modesty tied his tongue; whereupon she hastened to him, took him by the arm, and sat him beside her at the table, and he did not leave her presence until the night itself was departing.

This state of affairs went on for months, until that night came which the two sinners had never seen the like of for happiness, nor ever seen the like of for ill omen: they sat together in bliss, passing the cups between them, when suddenly the husband stood in the middle of the room, and his wife rose to stand before him. Seeing this, the youth turned

and fled, and the man pursued him at a run with a blade he happened to find; and once he was certain the youth would outrun him beyond doubt, he hurled the blade at him. It struck deep into his thigh, and the youth went on his way until he reached safety, where he collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

As for the man, he returned to his wife, and found her standing there, now clothed in an air of composure, with a sign of anger showing on her face. He had scarcely begun to speak to her before she wounded him with reproach and rebuke, saying: 'So this is your custom now — violating people's honour, and accusing others of violating yours! Was my patience not enough for you, with your excess in wantonness and your persistence in seduction, that you now come accusing me over a servant? By my father's head, I called for him only to keep me company until it should please your own wayward mistress to let you come home!'

'And now that your ill opinion of me has reached this point, I shall go to my father's house from tomorrow.' With these words she managed to extinguish his jealousy entirely, as though she had poured over him a jar of cold water; so he sat, toying with his moustache, and said: 'And why are you angry? This is only a fit of jealousy, which comes over any man when he finds someone with his wife — God forbid that I should accuse you of any wrong! But I have come to loathe this servant, and I do not wish him to remain in the mansion after tonight.'

She said: 'Do as you wish with him, but know that you have wronged an innocent man, and taken revenge on one who did you no harm, if your blade has done him any injury.' He said: 'I did throw the blade at him and it struck his thigh; I don't think the wound is serious, and in any case it will be easy enough to have him treated outside this mansion, and to bribe him with a little money so that his tongue stays silent about us.'

After a while the youth came to from his swoon, to find himself in a room he did not know, with a physician beside him holding smelling salts to his nose. The physician asked him: 'What is your name?' He answered: 'So-and-so.' 'And who inflicted this injury on you?' He answered: 'I did, myself.' The physician laughed aloud and went about his work; when he had finished he left, and a woman who had cast off the garment of her fiftieth year came in to the youth, brought him his lady's greetings, and sat with him to console him.

He remained in this condition for some days, and it was not long before his wound healed and his strength returned. Then a messenger

came to him from the lady, bringing a suit of fine clothing and a handful of gold coins, with this message: 'Wait for me, beloved, at such-and-such a place on Gezira Island.' And that evening the two of them were together in a single carriage, and each opened their heart to the other. The youth became the most fortunate of men, drawing double his wages, his provision coming to him in comfort every day, and meeting his lady every evening. And on this new arrangement I leave the two of them now.