

VIGNETTES OF EGYPTIAN LIFE

An extract from *Du'ā' al-Karawan* by Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

By PIERRE CACHIA

EGYPT'S once nearly dormant energies have, since the beginning of the 19th century, been roused by contact with the West, and her Renaissance has produced an abundant and varied literature. In it meet a multitude of values, traditional and modern, inherited and acquired – sometimes in uneasy juxtaposition, but increasingly in a rich and stimulating synthesis.

Although narrative fiction has held but a modest place in past Arabic literature, the Western-type short story – ideally suited to the needs of journals – and to a lesser extent the novel have become popular and successful genres not only for their own sakes as means of artistic self-expression, but also as vehicles for the denunciation of social evils, the propagation of modernist ideas, the inculcation of social and political precepts. Naturally, this fiction abounds in vignettes of the everyday life of the people. These may be essential to the story or incidental to it. They may be exercises in realistic description or indirect arguments for a social thesis. To the Egyptian reader they may even seem trivial or commonplace. For the outsider, however, they have a special value in that they illumine corners seldom reached by the sweeping beams of purposeful social surveys. For him also they have heightened charm as they let him into an intimacy he seldom has opportunity physically to enjoy.

One of the giants of Egypt's Renaissance is Ṭāhā Ḥusayn. Born in 1889 in a small provincial town, Ṭāhā Husayn belonged to a numerous family of modest condition. He lost his eyesight at the age of two, but his disability spurred rather than discouraged the self-assertiveness he displayed from an early age. He received at first the traditional education of a Muslim, but soon rebelled against the dead hand that the more conservative teachers placed on free inquiry. He switched his allegiance to the newly created and modernist-inspired Egyptian University, and was the first to receive a doctorate from it, in 1914. He was then sent on an educational mission to France and returned in 1919 with a doctorate from the Sorbonne. Although often – especially in the twenties and early thirties – at the storm-centres of vehement polemics between modernists and conservatives, he had a successful career in education – he was at one time Dean of the Faculty of Arts of the Egyptian University – and

in politics; indeed he rose to be Minister of Education in the last Wafdist government (January 1950 to January 1952). Above all he assumed a commanding position in literature as a prolific, versatile, and stimulating writer.

It is as a literary critic that he has made his deepest mark, but he has also produced six novels and a number of short stories. He is not at his best when writing fiction, as his gifts of organised and sustained invention are not of the highest. But when – as he often does – he draws on memories of his early life, his vibrant sensitiveness and graphic powers combine (despite some prolixity) to produce literary gems, as witness his autobiography *al-Ayyām*, which was the first modern Arabic literary work to attract world-wide attention and which has been translated into many languages, including English (Vol. I by E.H. Paxton as *An Egyptian Childhood*: vol. II by H. Wayment, as *The Stream of Days*).

One of his novels is *Du'ā' al-Karawān* (The Call of the Curlew). In this, the heroine tells how, although she started life as a mere housemaid, she had the good fortune to serve in an enlightened household where she had opportunity to learn both Arabic and French, so that she has developed into a woman of far greater sophistication and refinement of feeling than she would otherwise have become. Her sister Hanādī, also a housemaid, is seduced by her employer, and in accordance with the fierce code of honour that still survives in rural Egypt, her uncle butchers her. The heroine conceives a subtle plan of revenge: she enters the employment of her sister's seducer, inflames his passions but refuses to satisfy them. Having succeeded in driving him to remorse, she then discovers that she also has fallen in love with him, and they marry.

The novel is intended to celebrate the victory of love over hate, and the title refers to an imaginary bird that appears in the heroine's visions at moments of high emotional tension. The extract which follows is of little relevance to the story; indeed its earthy realism contrasts strangely with the exalted emotionalism of the rest of the novel. It is, however, colourful and revealing. It picks up the story at the point where the heroine, her mother, and her sister flee the town where Hanādī's shame has been discovered.

In a Village Guest-house

I remember how, weary and exhausted, we came at the close of the day to a certain village and sat down to rest for an hour or more by some mulberry trees. We scarcely spoke. Finally, when we had grown tired of our silence, fretful at our inaction, oppressed by our thoughts, our mother said: 'I don't suppose we can spend the night by these trees, and I don't think we shall get shelter and hospitality in this village – where we

know no one and no one knows us – from anyone except the headman. He is under obligation to keep his house open to anyone who calls by day or by night.'

She rose heavily and we rose, she moved slowly on and we followed, until we arrived at the headman's house. She never enquired about it or asked to be directed to it, but made her way towards it as if she had known it of old.

There we saw a number of people seated on a vast platform before the house; and in their midst was an old man upon whom one's gaze no sooner alighted than it conveyed assurance to the soul that here indeed was the village headman.

When we had come up to the assembly and had been noticed, our mother moved forward to the venerable old man and, in a quiet assured voice, she said: 'We are strangers who have chanced upon the village at this late hour of the day. Give us shelter, o headman, until the morning rises.' 'Ample and spacious be your abode,' he replied. Then he called and a servant came out of the house. His master said: 'Take these women to the guest-house and order that they be treated generously.'

The servant led us to the guest-house. It was a modest building with a vast court-yard before it. We were shown into a room and told to wait there till food was brought us.

Within an hour we had come into contact with other residents in the house, guests and servants who mingled as freely as if they all were mistresses of the house. Before long, we were engaging in conversation, making acquaintances, and being integrated into the household.

Then there was a coarse supper and an evening of confused and tumultuous fellowship before we retired. Some preferred the open and therefore went to sleep on the flat roof or in the court-yard; others more timidly sought refuge indoors.

Late the next morning, a woman appeared carrying dishes and baskets and announcing a meal. The women in the house were joined by some other poor ones from the village and all hustled towards the food, made room for themselves with their elbows, pushed with their hands, rebuked one another by word and look, at the same time loudly invoking blessings on the master of the house: God gird his flank and exalt his rank, God spare him woes and humble his foes.

Timidly, bashfully, we also joined in, urged on by hunger and by our social duty as guests, held back by shame and modesty.

Soon a circle was formed around the dishes. Words were muted and bodies rested; hands and jaws went into action.

How different were these coarse, rough hands – their skin shrivelled and wrinkled, holding a piece of bread and diving with it into the dishes

to seize what they could – from those fine, gentle, smooth, luxury-softened hands which extended delicately towards the dishes and never touched their contents except with certain implements known only to town-dwellers, indeed only to the more refined of the town-dwellers. And those gaping mouths into which food was hurriedly cast, to settle there no longer than it took the gullet to engulf it! It was as if Nature had deposited in these mouths no sense of taste with which to enjoy food or drink, but had made them a mere pathway to the gullet and thence to the stomach!

How could I force my hand forward with those other hands, or make my jaws labour like those other jaws? I sat among those women glancing at them, irritated by them, deluding my hunger with large round thin wafers which I crumbled between my fingers and crunched every now and again. Mother was helping herself with frugality and moderation, held back by shame and grief from eating her fill, while my sister sat silent and down-cast, pensive as though she was in a different world, living a different life.

The dishes were emptied and the women dispersed in groups. We tried to isolate ourselves in some corner, but we were joined by three women who sat down with us and forced us into conversation.

One of them – a woman on whose face the last glimmers of youth vied with the first shadows of age, whose voice like her gestures retained a liveliness in which there was alluring serenity and an obvious taste for fun – opened out: 'Never until this day had I seen women make do with their eyes and ears for hands, mouths, tongues, gullets, and bellies! You have been among us since last night, and we haven't yet heard a sound from you or learnt a thing about you. You joined our circle round the food but you scarcely stretched a hand towards it or got a bite of it. It's as if you got nourishment from looking at others swallowing, gulping and devouring, and satisfied your need of conversation by listening to others conversing'. She let loose a laugh that must have been heard by all in the house and even outside it, and that filled the atmosphere with a spirit of levity and lewdness. Then, when she had exhausted laughter, she drew in her breath in a grating, provoking snort and asked: 'Is that how you manage in everything that a woman needs by way of pleasure and comfort and contentment? If so, yours is a wretched lot!'

When she had spoken she turned upon our mother a powerful gaze intended to challenge her to speak and force her to answer, but our mother spoke not a word. She did not know how to counter this torrential flow of words. Her tongue was knotted and her face showed signs of violent agitation. Nor could her eyes withstand the gaze of this daring, playful woman, so she lowered them and hung her head like a small child insistently questioned by a grown up and too shy to answer.

Then the woman turned to me and burst out: 'Your mother is silent and has nothing to say; your sister is so downcast that there seems to be no hope that she should understand or answer anything – so let's hear you speak. I can see a certain brazenness in your eye, and something not unlike cheekiness in your features. I daresay there's no salt in your eye ... Speak! Who are you and where have you come from? What's your story? Why are you off your food? Why do you keep your mouths shut?'

Before this strange and sudden onslaught, and before the immoderate laughter of the other two women – contrasting with our mother's unbroken silence and my sister's unrelieved depression – I could not help laughing also as I retorted: 'And you – who are you and where do you come from? What business have you to question us and press us?'

Addressing her friends she said quickly: 'Didn't I tell you that she had all her teeth and that there was no salt in her eyes – that she'd be the one to listen to me and answer me?' Then she turned to me: 'An investigation ... Do you hear? It's an investigation. I am empowered to subject you to it. You *shall* know who I am, and you'll find out that I am used to carrying out investigations – with women and sometimes even with men – and to demand information from both.' Again she let loose her laugh and emitted her snort, and insistently demanded to know who we were and whence we had come.

So this woman kept taunting us and toying with us, roughly at times and gently at others, seriously sometimes but mostly jocularly – her two friends abetting her in some of her endeavours – until we felt somewhat attracted to them, and spent a good deal of the forenoon conversing with them. I thus came to know enough about them to make me eager to retain contact with them so long as we stayed in that house.

All of them came from the town we ourselves had left, and they had come to this village together, preceding us by a few hours. Only they had come riding whereas we had walked.

The 'investigator' who had questioned us so insistently and who had proved herself such a tease was a woman of great importance of whom I learnt more later. I discovered that her name was current on all tongues everywhere, not only in the town but also in many of the surrounding villages, farms, and estates.

Her name was Zannūba and her life had been crowded with momentous events. The whole of her youth had been an adventure, full of temptations for herself and many others. She had been an accomplished dancer, and as such she had had powerful attractions for the young men who belonged to the town or who came to it every winter to work in the sugar refinery. The winter season thus used to bring her much entertainment, much money, and widespread fame. But when, little by little, youth drew away and

middle age approached, she affected something not unlike a middle course and imposed upon herself an appearance of moderation, ringing down over her licentiousness and frivolity a thin curtain which the perspicacity of some could penetrate and thus lead them to the object of their desire.

Then she formed a link with men of authority in the town's police force. Her assets in this connection were her acquaintance with youths, her contacts with men, the accessibility of certain homes to her, the fact that she heard much of what was said and knew of many happenings. She was in fact a police spy who looked into certain matters that the eyes of men could not penetrate. She made much money out of these activities, and in addition acquired prestige, for people feared her and sought to ingratiate themselves with her.

She was most useful to the police and best able to assist them when the plague, cholera, or any other epidemic hit the town and surrounding villages, for the government then wanted to know who had been stricken that he might be isolated in one of those tented lazarets which people hated and tried to avoid more than death itself. At such times Zannūba was like a bee continually in motion. She was in every street, in every lane, in every close, in every house, and the ambulance from the department of Hygiene roamed the streets and closes and lanes after her to snatch the stricken away from their homes. At such times people had the greatest hatred of Zannūba, but they were forced to receive her and bear with her, smiling at her and at the same time cursing the epidemic because it did not strike her down, did not carry her off in the ambulance and did not confine her in one of the tents in which she had others confined.

From all these occupations Zannūba amassed a not inconsiderable fortune, and this - when she was no longer young - she began to exploit and increase by either of two methods. For one thing, she was a usurer, lending one pound in return for three payable by instalments over the year; for another, she used to buy from markets in towns or in villages what cereals she could get at a low price, then sell them to the poor and destitute at oppressive prices, which she could impose upon them because she gave them time to pay. Young men were no longer interested in her, and she was less inclined to open libertinage, so she searched and searched until she found herself a watchman, a stranger to the town, who was of powerful constitution, tall and massive and endowed with a fearsome voice, yet of weak personality, unpleasant disposition, and tainted conscience. This man she took to herself as husband or lover, living with him in a relationship which the law condones but which morality and religion condemn, and of which the townspeople most strongly disapproved.

When I met her first she had come to the village in which we were lodged to buy what wheat, maize, and beans she could, then go back where she

could use her stock to suck in the money of the poor and destitute.

Khaḍra was of no smaller importance or lower prestige than Zannūba. Like her, she enjoyed notoriety and a far-flung reputation. Her comings and goings to and from town excited much talk, for through her men and women were made wretched, through her also they sometimes found happiness.

She was a marriage broker. She used to go to the capital from time to time and bring back a considerable quantity of those trivial, simple, cheap knick-knacks which to women are always a temptation, and to men a source both of misery and enjoyment. In the town, there was not one wealthy home that Khaḍra might not enter either openly or in secret. And equally accessible to Khaḍra was the inner self of the lady of the house who used to listen to her gossip and hear her news, perhaps even pass some titbit on to her or entrust her with messages and with news.

Khaḍra's activities increased and multiplied in winter when the Cook Company's boats plied the Nile upstream and downstream, for it was then that Khaḍra used to go to Cairo to buy goods and samples. She used to patronize these steamboats because the third class fares were cheap, and because she could take with her more cases and packages than she was allowed on the train.

On her return to the town the news would spread among the inhabitants, and women would await her visit. The happiest lady then was the one favoured with her first visit: she had first choice of her stock of different materials, of various scents, of the simple cheap trinkets which women require and in the acquisition of which they vie with one another – in particular, varieties of beads and glass bangles with which women adorn their arms, inserting their hands into them by a difficult, delicate, dangerous manoeuvre scarcely ever completed without one of them incurring heavy injury to her hand or arm.

The first week of Khaḍra's return from Cairo was, in those houses, a festival for both women and children. The ones rejoiced in the knick-knacks and trinkets laid before them, the others delighted in the varieties of sweets brought to them, the coconut ice and especially certain sweetmeats which Khaḍra brought from Cairo, the like of which could not be made in the town. Delicate and soft, they put the teeth to no hardship and afforded mouth and gullet effortless delight – unlike the locally-made sugar rock coated with sesame or chick-peas, which was so gross and hard that saliva, molars and tongue had to collaborate in breaking it down, and did so only after much effort and exertion.

To the adolescent girls Khaḍra used to carry the most irresistible of temptations in the form of coloured kerchiefs which they used to wrap with artistry round their heads, making of them tempting, attractive prisons for their abundant hair – not to speak of the threads hung with narrow,

thin, delicate pieces of metal to be worked in with the girls' tresses that they might glisten attractively as they dangled over their backs and tinkle gentle as the girls walked or gestured.

The men used to accept Khaḍra's return from Cairo smilingly, indeed joyfully at first, believing that it brought innocent satisfaction and harmless amusement to their womenfolk. But as the days passed and Khaḍra's visits were repeated, as the women's covetousness for the articles offered became more pronounced and their desire expressed itself insistently on their face and in their conversation and in their altered dispositions towards the men who proved unyielding, these became extremely annoyed with Khaḍra and wished that she might some time go to Cairo and not return.

Once Khaḍra had satisfied the townswomen of various ranks and degrees of wealth, she used to peddle the trashy articles left over in the neighbouring villages. On the day I met her, she had come to the village with two or three cases filled with the glass bangles, beads, and coloured kerchiefs which had been rejected by the town and which the villages would receive with potent yearning, perhaps causing sleepless nights to many a village woman and filling the dreams of many a peasant maiden.

It would be wrong to think that Nafīsa was less renowned or of lower standing among the people of the town or of the countryside than either of her companions. Her youth was far behind her and old age had left upon her face, her voice, and her entire body ugly, repulsive traces. Yet she had access to every home and was a friend to every woman. For she was a fortuneteller who could relate what had been, describe what was, and foretell what was to be. She had strong connections with jinns and demons; she could convey the messages that had to pass between them and the women, and could command their intervention in many of the concerns of the ignorant, simple women who still believe the power of the jinns over humans to be limitless. Here is one who is at odds with her husband because he is unfaithful to her or because he prefers another wife; so she seeks Nafīsa's help in giving one of the jinn power over him and making him turn away from his mistress or wife. There is another who senses a certain coldness or disinclination in her husband's behaviour; so she seeks Nafīsa's help in providing her with such talismans as will make her husband turn to her in kindness and spend all his time in her house. Nor was Nafīsa's influence over men and youths any less than it was over women and girls, for she was good at consulting the divinatory sea-shells, good at moving the hearts of women who had become uncompliant over disaffected, good at putting the jinn to work on tortuous requirements.

Nafisa was consequently always busy, scarcely ever resting from con-

veying messages and requests between the men and the women of the town, and between them both and the jinns and demons. Indeed her fame for such activities had spread beyond the town to the surrounding villages. First some of the rustics had come to her, then she had taken to traveling among them with her magic, her talismans, and her shells. When I met her she was in fact on a visit to the village, bringing to its people the information about the Unknown which they required.

We had not been long in conversation with those women before we found Nafisa the quickest to win us over, the most eager to possess us and to forge a link between us and her friends among the jinns and demons. She found no difficulty in doing so, for the dazed girl who scarcely saw or heard or understood or answered was worthy of the old sorceress's attention, and attract it she did. The old woman plied her with questions to find out what was the matter with her, but the girl would not answer and our mother was even more determined to maintain silence, so she remained immersed in it. Questions were therefore directed to me, and I had no choice but to pretend that my sister was suffering from an illness which had worn down the doctor's efforts, a disease unknown to us and to which we could find no remedy. How appropriate was it then for the purse to be opened and the shells to be scattered on the ground! How deftly did Nafisa handle them, piling and dividing, scooping and scattering, pairing and isolating, forming patterns into which she read the most wonderful accounts of past, present, and future.

Long years have passed since that day, but I can see her yet gazing long into the shells, her face showing that there was something she tried in vain to understand. I can hear her broken voice, which always had the character of a whisper no matter how loud it rose. And I have retained the sentences she spoke on that day - I have not forgotten them and never shall. How could I when time has since established their veracity? Long did she pore over her shells; then she lifted her gaze up to my sister and scrutinized her face; then she lowered her eyes on to the shells again, and finally raised her head saying to the girl: 'Yours is a strange case, my daughter. I see you between two: one who loves you and shall harm you, and one who has harmed you and shall love you. I try to understand but I can't. It's up to you, my daughter, to consult either our masters from among the jinns or our masters from among God's elect. This should not be difficult. In the village next to this, which can be reached in little more than an hour, is all you need. There is the tomb of our master So-and-so who works wonders, and there is also the house of Such-and such whose associate from the jinn also reveals wonders.'

Nafisa had scarcely spoken the first sentence of her discourse when our mother sprang up as if mechanically impelled, and hurried away. We did not see her again for a long time.