

SEVEN DAYS AT THE CECIL

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Harry Tzalas

SEVEN DAYS AT THE CECIL



CONTENTS

1. THE FIRST DAY	11
2. LITTLE RUTH'S DAY	35
3. THE UNFORTUNATE SCRIBE'S DAY	45
4. THE LOST WARRIORS' DAY	89
5. THE FAITHLESS WOMAN'S DAY	127
6. THE BALD SINGER'S DAY	171
7. THE LAST DAY	205
8. EPILOGUE	231
9. GLOSSARY	237



FOREWORD TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

Seven Days in Alexandria (Επτά Ημέρες στην Αλεξάνδρεια), written at the end of the 1990s, was first published in Greek in 2000.

The author would like to draw to the reader's attention the fact that, over the ten years or more that have elapsed between the writing of the book and its publication in English under the title *Seven Days at the Cecil*, many changes have occurred in Alexandria. Some of the characters mentioned in the stories are no longer of this world and certain buildings also have disappeared.

The panorama of the Corniche, after its recent widening and the rise of monumental skyscrapers, is hardly recognizable. But the historical centre of the City has not much changed thanks to the efforts of some dreamers, who persist in believing that a City that preserves its architectural heritage makes for a better place to live. The house at 19 Sharaa Mamoun, in Moharrem Bey, where Lawrence Durrell stayed during the turbulent years of the Second World War, although in derelict condition, bravely defies the assaults of time and of human neglect.

There have been other changes, as well, not all of them engaged in the wrong direction. The *Bibliotheca Alexandrina* is the town's new landmark; the building was not there when Cécile, Sorial, Travers, and Milena were strolling along the Corniche... I certainly would have steered them

then to this Mecca of culture, located perhaps where once stood the *Mouseion*, its ancient and illustrious predecessor.

And contrary to what held true ten years ago, when the only guidebooks to the city were E. M. Forster's *Alexandria: a History and a Guide* and Evaristo Breccia's *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum, Guide de la ville ancienne et moderne et du Musée Gréco-Romain*, one can now find several books to help introduce the non-initiated visitor to the Great City. Among them, Jean-Yves Empereur's *Alexandrie Hier et Demain* is a very practical and useful little guidebook as is too Michael Haag's *Alexandria Illustrated*.

I would like to thank the translator of this book, Susan Mandouvalou-Power, who lived in Alexandria at the time when the book was written, for her conscientious work and patience. My appreciation goes also to my Alexandrian friend Christine Ayoub for her unfailing help and insightful suggestions.

The *Επτά Ημέρες στην Αλεξάνδρεια* was used by several Greek travelers as a guidebook for their first visit to Alexandria, but it has also brought back memories of their youth to those uprooted Greek-Alexandrians who can only return to the City in their dreams.

I wished, for sentimental reasons, that the English translation be published in Alexandria, so I am grateful to those who have made it possible: Dr. Ismail Serageldin, Dr. Mohamed Awad, and Dr. Sahar Hamouda of the *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*.

FOREWORD TO THE GREEK EDITION

In the introductions of many novels we read that “the characters in this book are fictional”. Similar disclaimers are often to be found amongst film credits, with the aim, it seems, of protecting the author, publisher or producer from the claims or objections of those who either resemble the characters portrayed in the story or who have found themselves in similar circumstances.

But the characters in this book are not fictional. They all exist, regardless of the fact that, for obvious reasons, their names have been altered. However this is neither a biographical work, nor pages from the autobiography of the author, who, while not limiting himself purely to relating facts, was inspired by real situations and events.

The narrator of the story cannot always be identified with the author, although they share the same thoughts, the same doubts, the same memories, and above all, the same love of Alexandria and the same nostalgic disposition.

And the city is real, as are the historical facts and topographical observations, without however abiding to the strict rules of an historical text or to the rigidity of a guidebook.



THE DUST I THE FIRST DAY AY

“Welcome. *Ahlan wa sahan!*”

With a broad smile and a warm handshake, Sorial greeted me in the hotel lobby.

My London publishers, when asking me to write a tourist guide to Alexandria, had forewarned me:

“Our representative in Alexandria is an extraordinary person, always eager and cordial. There is nothing that you could ask of him that he cannot do. There is no door he cannot open. In his town, he knows everyone and everything.

“If you should wish to visit the ancient cistern in the crypts of Saint Mark’s, the Coptic Patriarchal Church – no problem, Sorial is a Copt and knows the Patriarch.

“You want to get past the ‘Cerberus’ who guards the Greek Orthodox Patriarchal Library? He can arrange that too – Sorial is a friend of His Beatitude.

“Or if you'd like to go down into the vaults of the Nabi Danial mosque – rumoured for the past century and a half to be the burial place of Alexander the Great – then Sorial, who's friendly with the director of the Service for Islamic Antiquities, will get you permission on the very same day.

“At the house of our representative – we call him that, but in fact, the man helps us out with whatever we need in Egypt without remuneration – you can meet the Governor of Alexandria, the military commander, foreign diplomats, local politicians, intellectuals, businessmen, clerics and all that remains of the élite of cosmopolitan Alexandria.

“You'll find Sorial at all the consular receptions – in fact he never misses a social gathering. In between, he has other obligations to attend to – weddings, baptisms and a few funerals. Occasionally, when he has the time to spare, he dabbles in his profession – he's an architect.

“The city holds no secrets for Sorial. He knows the history of Alexandria in every detail. The past enchants him and he enjoys sharing all his 'discoveries', his 'little secrets', as he calls them, with special visitors.

“He'll take you up onto the walls, the little that remains of the mediaeval fortifications preserved in the east. He'll take you down into the catacombs and the subterranean Ptolemaic necropolis, not forgetting to guide you round the three-storey cisterns, where he'll explain that beneath the Alexandria of light, there exists another city of darkness and silence, where the waters of the Nile have flowed through a complex labyrinth since ancient times.

“Sorial is tireless, and although he must be over seventy, he’ll walk the feet off you around the narrow alleyways of the Arab districts. If he should see that you are exhausted and ready to cry: ‘Enough!’, he’ll stop a passing horse-drawn carriage, stressing that, together with the tram, this is the most pleasant form of transport. He detests cars, and rarely uses his Citroen, a real antique, a throwback to mid-war technology.

“But Sorial is also a lover of good food. A connoisseur of all things of quality, he knows where to find fresh fish, live lobster and huge crab. Of course, he’ll take you to the best places to eat the traditional *ful*, with crispy pita bread, and falafel with tahini. This gastronomic tour will include an evening at the Santa Lucia, the San Giovanni and the renowned *Élite*, run by Madame Christina.

“You’ll remember all these places, of course. They are old restaurants, perhaps even pre-war.”

The words of the English publisher came back to me now as I was taken by surprise at Sorial’s welcome. I had not expected to meet him the minute I crossed the threshold of the Cecil Hotel. It rather annoyed me actually, because, despite my long absence from Alexandria, I felt this was my town. I was born here. I had grown up here. I did not need, I brooded, to be guided around my Alexandria. It was almost forty years since I had left, so I should be given the time to readapt. I should be left alone to rediscover the landmarks of the past, to come to terms with the present, to adjust...

Alone, I wanted to rediscover those secret corners where something remained of my childhood footsteps. I wanted to gently, gradually, rekindle the memories that I had coveted in the cubby-holes of my soul. I wanted to mourn; I wanted to be moved... perhaps even to weep for the lost yesterdays. That is why I wanted to be alone.

It soon appeared, however, that Sorial was endowed with tact, and once he had taken my hand in greeting he said:

"I know that you have been away for many years. I realise that your return will be emotional... It will bring you both pleasure and pain... I simply passed by to welcome you and to meet a friend of some friends of mine who arrived from France yesterday. She is staying here too."

I suggested that we have a drink at the bar together, but he politely refused.

"You must surely be tired. Why don't you go and rest. It is still early and you have the whole day ahead of you to rediscover the past. If you like, we can meet up again this evening. It would give me particular pleasure to invite you to dine with us. Here are my telephone numbers," he handed me his card; "You will find me either at my office or at home. If you do not call, I will understand that you wish to be alone, in which case, we shall talk again tomorrow. I wish you a pleasant stay."

It felt good to be alone. I picked up my room-key from the reception where a pleasant, chubby Arab girl stressed that Sorial Effendi had insisted that I be given room 507, the

corner room on the top floor with a view of both the sea and Ramleh Station.

The twin elevators of the Cecil Hotel are true antiques. The old chambers are made of wood with glass doors. The wells, within which the elevators lazily carry the guests up and down, are adorned with attractive metalwork.

The chief bellboy counts your luggage: bag, sac de voyage, umbrella – three pieces in all. So three bellboys are mobilised to deliver them to your room. The most senior goes ahead to open the door of the elevator, to accompany you upstairs, all the time issuing abrupt orders to the attending escort of helpers. If you give good bakshish from the first day, you can be sure that for the rest of your stay, whenever you wish to use the elevator, you will be greeted with bows, doors will be held open for you, and you will be accompanied on the ride up to your room.

The diminutive Nubian in charge of the elevator (all the staff of the hotel are small; it seems they are chosen so that the guests are not alarmed by burly dark men) first tries out what little he knows of two or three languages, and finding that conversation works best in French, he assures you, between the second and third floors, that Field Marshal Montgomery stayed in the room opposite during the Second World War. As you pass the third floor, he will point out the room of Om Kalsoum, the 'Nightingale of the East', the room next to it, where Omar Sherif stayed, and further down, the room of Josephine Baker – the dark Parisian exotic dancer, legend of the inter-war years. By the time we reached room 507, he had reeled off the names

of some ten or so famous, loyal guests of the old hotel. You see, the elevator moves slowly, desperately so, and each floor is high-ceilinged.

Room 507 offers a truly wonderful view. Bless you, Sorial, for choosing this room, I said to myself as I stepped out onto the little balcony overlooking the sea. The whole length of the Corniche spread out below me. Hungrily I took in the vista that I had been denied for so long. Far off to the left, the old fort of Qait Bey stands guard over the Eastern Harbour in the very same place where the second of the Ptolemies built the magnificent Pharos. Unhurriedly, I surveyed the coast. Small boats bob on the water. Two fishermen transfix their eyes on the ends of their rods awaiting the first bite. Little Arab boys come and go, climbing up onto the stone wall of the seafront, playfully chasing one another. Endless old buses pass by, antiquated cars, and occasionally a horse-drawn carriage. It is years since I have heard the rhythmic clatter of horseshoes on the asphalt road and the jingle of bells with every toss of the horse's head. A policeman attempts indifferently to bring some sort of order to the traffic, oblivious to the reactions of the drivers who vainly honk their horns incessantly.

On one side of the road stand the large *okellas*, the same buildings that I had watched from the ship, bidding me farewell as I left for foreign lands forty years before. To the right, Saad Zaghloul Square, with the imposing bronze statue of the Pasha standing between the date palms, gazing out to the sea. Further down, Ramleh Station, from where even today the trams set out for the eastern suburbs.

I used to take the tram from here every morning to go to school. I go out onto the other balcony overlooking the square to get a better view to the east. The coast spreads out before me – writhing like a snake creating numerous bays and headlands in its wake. I see Silsileh, the ancient *Cape Lochias* that was part of the royal Ptolemaic quarters, and formed the eastern border of the Easter Port that was called the *Megas Limin*. I follow the progress of the Corniche until it disappears around a bend in the coastline.

Let me see if I can remember the suburbs and their beaches: Mazarita, Soter, Chatby, Camp César, Ibrahimeya, Sporting, Cleopatra, Sidi Gaber, Stanley, Rouchdy, Glymenopoulo, San Stefano, Sidi Bishr and then? ... I do not recall. Many of the old street names have changed. I know the suburbs have changed too. The whole of Ramleh has changed. It is now heavily built up. The city has spread out towards the east like the huge tentacles of a monstrous octopus. It is now filled with tall blocks of flats. Buildings everywhere – they told me that even Sidi Bishr, where we used to enjoy the endless sands, is unrecognisably suffocated by enormous buildings.

But the sea is the same, the same as it was then. That is why I love the sea; it never changes. The waves arriving from the north still shimmer as they touch the ancient stones. They come and go interminably, just as they did when I watched them as a child, and tomorrow they will still do so. I reflect that the waves know why they come and go, just as the sky knows why it lends its colours to the sea. The gulls that gaily squeal their welcome to the rising morning

sun and the towering date palms in the square opposite that tremble as they are brushed by the breeze, they know what has gone before, they know what the future holds. It is only man who ponders and questions. And I have so many questions as I prepare to face the city. I do not have the patience to pause a while, nor do I feel the need to rest – Alexandria is waiting for me, awash in the May sunshine.

I feel suspense, craving, as if I were going to meet a loved-one after many years. How changed will she seem? I have been told that the centre of the city is the same, almost unaltered.

I consider as I go out of the hotel into the city where I grew up, where I went to school, where my father and mother were born, where my grandparents lived and died, that I have no relatives left, no friends, no acquaintances. Who will I talk to about the past? With whom will I browse through the yellowed pages of memory? Who will tell me what has become of those who left, those who have been lost with the passage of time?

But the buildings are all still here where I left them, somewhat aged, somewhat changed, resignedly enduring the ordeal of abandonment, the negligence of man. Like elderly ladies who have known glorious days, but have been worn down by merciless time.

I take the boulevard Saad Zaghloul. I look to the right, to the left – I know most of the shops. There, towards the end of the street, before I turn into Mohammed Ali Square, is Garo's, the shop of the Armenian artist who used to sell paints, paintbrushes and canvases along with his own works

of art. As a schoolboy, I worked there for a summer. They still sell paints and art supplies. The new owner can only just remember Garo. When I ask what happened to him, he tells me that he is a professor at a School of Fine Arts in Canada.

“Whatever made you think of Garo? How did you know him? It’s been forty years since he left. My father bought this shop from him and I run it now.”

Mohammed Ali Square appears vast in the spring sunlight. The mounted statue of the founder of the new Egypt gazes proudly from his high pedestal. All the great buildings are in place, just as I left them. Only the one at the head of the square has been demolished. I think it was the Stock Exchange building, the *Bourse*. It was from its balcony in the summer of '56 that Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. I remember that day as if it were yesterday, and I reflect that, if those events had not taken place on 26th July 1956, then I might still be living in Alexandria.

I continue to saunter on past Evangelismos, the largest Orthodox church in the city. The Greek Orthodox Patriarchate is housed nearby nowadays. Without going in, I glance into the churchyard, and remember how at Easter the whole place would rock with the sound of exploding firecrackers.

As I pass the Attarine mosque, the call of the muezzin reminds me that it is midday Friday, the time of the Great Prayer of the week. Countless prayer carpets, straw and rag mats have been laid out in the alleyway next to the mosque. In endless rows, the faithful of Allah pray. “Allah

ou Akbar. Great is Allah... There is no other God but Allah... And Mohammed is the Prophet of Allah."

They kneel, they stand, kneel again, touch their foreheads to the ground. That is how it was done back then every Friday too. The only difference is that now there are far more of the faithful, and the muezzin no longer climbs the innumerable steps up the minaret that like a long snail struggles to touch the sky, for at the top they have placed a loudspeaker.

The Greek barber's shop where we had our hair cut as children used to be at the next corner. I do not remember the barber's name... but I do recall that he had two large glass jars in the window containing leeches, which he used to bleed anyone suffering from high blood pressure. I can still hear the sound of the beads and trinkets that hung in a thick protective curtain in the doorway to keep the flies out of the shop. And I remember the smell of the cheap cologne that the barber used to sprinkle on our heads after our haircuts, mixed with the scent of the talcum powder he used to dredge the back of our necks and sideburns with to reduce the sting of the razor.

There is no trace of the barber's shop. It is as if it had never been there... I turn into *Rue Fouad*, which used to be called *Rue de Rosette* because it ended to the east at the Rosetta Gate, *Bab Rashid*. Now they call it *Sharaa Horreya*. In ancient times, it was the Canopic Way of Ptolemaic Alexandria, the *Via Canopica* of the Romans. It may be the only road that has remained in place since the city was built.

Rue Fouad is a street of smart shops and good cinemas, the heart of the shopping centre. Fortunately, everything is still where I left it: the cinemas – the *Royal*, the *Plaza*, the *Fouad* and, further on, the *Amir*, the *Rio*, and on the corner of Safia Zaghoul Street, the *Metro* cinema. Only one is missing: the *Strand* has been pulled down. But the *Pastroudis* pâtisserie is still there. The aroma of the cakes is not so enticing, or perhaps I have grown older and I have eaten my fill? The sweets look less tempting, but they are still always offered as treats.

Next to the *Fouad* cinema is *Édouard's* – Édouard was an Armenian who used to make the best shoes in town. Aunt Rita, considered the most elegant in our family, used to buy her shoes from there. The shop window still looks the same, but there are fewer shoes on display. Just five or six dusty pairs thoughtlessly arranged. The shop sign used to be one of the most attractive in the street: "ÉDOUARD", each wooden letter separately marked, painted red, and subtly illuminated by hidden lighting from behind at night.

Who knows how long it has been since the first 'D' fell down? It has not completely fallen off, but it tilts oddly, leaning against the 'O' like a drunkard. I ask the middle-aged man sitting at the back of the gloomy, long, narrow shop if the business still belongs to *Édouard Gazarian*.

"Édouard died in Canada over thirty years ago. Did you know him? I'm his son, Dikran."

Yes, I remember Dikran. He was the younger of Édouard's two sons. I reminded him that we used to go wild duck hunting together with our fathers at Lake Mariout.

He could only just remember my father, he was very young then...

He was pleased, moved to find himself talking to someone who had known his father. But he was upset by the good years, as he repeated over and over again, that were gone, the family that had scattered, the friends who had moved to foreign lands.

"They've all gone...", he said with a sigh, "There's only me left here. But what can I do? How could I leave my mother when she so stubbornly refused to leave Alexandria? At first, my father used to travel back and forth from Canada, dividing his time between our house here and the house of my brother, Sarkis, in Toronto. Then he died. He wasn't all that old... but as you probably recall, he had trouble with his heart. So there was just me and my mother left. Sarkis comes over from time to time to see us.

"I never married for my mother's sake. You know what women are like: they promise you the world before the wedding, then they turn grouchy. They start nagging... It's better this way." He lowered his head.

"Now that my mother's over ninety she doesn't go out of the house any more. Last year it was all I could do to take her to church at Easter. She just sits in bed from morning till night watching television. She's put on weight... You remember how dainty she used to be."

No, I did not remember Madame Gazarian at all, but I nodded as if I did.

"The doctor tells me not to feed her too much, or else I shall have trouble moving her soon. How can I not give her

as much as she wants to eat, though? When I was a child, she fed me as much as I wanted."

I was upset as I left *Édouard's* shoe-shop. I almost blamed myself. Why had I gone in? Dikran's pain had spoiled the joy of my return.

Never mind, I told myself, that's life. Alexandria is not to blame because things turned out badly for Dikran. I shall go back to the Cecil to cool off, I shall phone Sorial and accept his invitation for this evening.

* * *

When I met up with Sorial that evening at the refreshment bar of the Cecil, he asked me how I had found Alexandria after an absence of so many decades. He seemed satisfied that my impressions were positive and with a relieved smile said:

"Good," he said this in French: "Bon" and added, "I am so tired of people who come back to Alexandria after many years and do nothing but complain about how beautiful the city was back then, how clean the streets were, what a good life they had with their three and four servants – the Greeks, you'll recall, actually called their servants 'slaves' without so much as a qualm – their black menservants, Fatma who cooked such wonderful firm, browned rice..."

I agreed with much of what Sorial said, although I remembered that by 'slave' (*servo* or *serva*, as the Italians called them), they actually meant 'servant'. The words had the same meaning. I recalled, without actually mentioning

it of course, that the lower class Egyptians were so poverty-stricken that even the poorest Greeks and other Europeans could afford to employ a servant. They worked for a mere pittance, more for a plate of food and a place to lay their heads than for the meagre pay of half a pound or a pound that they received at the end of the month. And to be fair, we should say that many mistresses treated their 'slaves' kindly, and if they paid them so little it was only because most of them were themselves of poor working-class families who could only employ staff because they were so readily available and affordable.

I told Sorial about my experience that afternoon when, on returning to the hotel, I decided to cool myself down with a beer in the bar and found myself dealing with the grumbling of a Belgian tourist who was questioning whether it was really worth visiting modern-day Alexandria.

"But tell me, sir, why should a tourist visit Alexandria these days?"

The man asked me this question with the bitterness of a traveller who has vainly searched in the Alexandria populated by five million souls to find the city of Cavafy, E. M. Forster, Fausta Cialente, Lawrence Durrell, Stratis Tsirkas.

The Belgian fellow-guest at the Cecil, visiting Alexandria for the first time, did nothing but complain. Nowhere could he find the Alexandria he had yearned to see for so long; the city he had come to know through poetry and prose. The present was traumatic for him. The dirt, the dung-filled streets, the flies, the senseless honking of horns, the buildings wounded by time and negligence, the taxi driver

who cheated him when he went to visit Pompey's Pillar, the tittering policeman who could not understand him when he got lost in the neighbourhoods of the Western Harbour – everything was wrong.

"I mean, give me," he went on, "one good reason why it's worth a tourist wasting even one day in this miserable, run-down town."

Calling upon all he had read about Alexandria – and he had read a great deal – he began to recite poetry describing the beautiful cosmopolitan, much-lauded city; and just when I expected to hear the inevitable "... *bid farewell to the Alexandria you are losing*", he surprised me with a lesser-known verse by Seferis:

The new moon came out in Alexandria
Holding the old in its arms
Approaching the gate of the Sun
In the darkness of the heart...
And bodies like snapped branches
And like uprooted roots.
Our thirst
A mounted stone guard
At the dark Gate of the Sun
Knowing not what to ask: Holding vigil
In exile hereabouts
Beside the tomb of Alexander the Great.

Despite the unfitting mixture of Erasmian and modern-Greek pronunciation, his love of an elusive, imaginary Alexandria began to move me. The initial irritation that I

had felt for the irreverent manner in which he spoke of *my* Alexandria was transformed into compassion.

My God, I thought, you should not look at Alexandria so brazenly, with your eyes wide open. This city is not only the present, but also the past. You sense it through half-closed eyes, you do not look it straight in the face - you feel it with your heart.

"My good man," I said, "You're looking at the city in the wrong way. It's not her fault. Alexandria was never a place for those passing through, for hurried visitors.

"The last cosmopolitan centre of the Mediterranean is a mature town, 2,300 years old. She carries with her the scars of the successive eras that she has lived through. The Ptolemaic, the Roman, the Early Christian city, the city of the Arab conquest, the Ottoman – all are represented by monuments and ruins. And the new Alexandria dreamt of by Mohammed Ali who, mounted upon his horse, gazes out to the west from the great square that bears his name, holds particular interest.

"There are remarkable buildings from the 19th and 20th centuries to be found in the centre of Alexandria, as well as along the Corniche and in its countless suburbs. All the attempts to imitate town architecture co-exist to bring about a balance. The Neo-Classical buildings of the Greek ruling classes stand hand in glove with the Neo-Venetian, the Neo-Baroque, the Neo-Gothic, the Neo-Islamic of the Italian, Jewish, French, British, Armenian, Lebanese and local traders. They symbolise the cosmopolitan Alexandria – a wonder of coexistence, where simple people from

different tribes, faiths and nations lived harmoniously and flourished.

“These days, few of those foreigners remain, but most of their buildings are still standing, their signs still remain outside their shops and offices. The works of man remain as well as the memories.

“And just as Forster did almost a century ago, just as so many other lovers of the city have done, we can still dream of the past: we can imagine the remarkable *Pharos* standing guard over the Eastern Harbour, the Soma of Alexander the Great, that celebrated monument, the Ptolemies with their queens and magnificent palaces, the unfortunate Cleopatra and Mark Anthony, Octavian, Caesar, Amr the Conqueror, the caravans pausing at the Islamic city walls to quench their thirst before passing through the Gate of the Sun.

“It’s even possible for the perceptive visitor to eavesdrop upon the breath of the *Poet* whose steps may lead him down the narrow alleyways of the old city where Durrell’s heroines will suddenly appear.

“And you, my friend, who have come from so far away, you too can make your own Alexandria. The materials are here – all you have to do is to match them up through half-closed eyes. The azure blue sea that grapples incessantly with the ancient stones is the same, just as the breeze that mingles the special aroma of saltiness with the scent of fuul and jasmine is the same. The people are the same – simple, approachable, warm-hearted – and the local children still flood the streets and the squares just as they always used to.

"This is Alexandria, and she is beautiful, she is eternal."

I do not think that I convinced the Belgian visitor to the Cecil, for he looked at me as if to say: "That man must have had a touch too much sun..."

But Sorial was satisfied and said: "I'm sure you will write a fine book on Alexandria," and went on with a tender smile, "Myself, I never stopped loving Alexandria. And you, you carry her within you."

"But allow me to tell you about the people we shall be with tonight..." He broke off suddenly to ask, "I hope you like fish and seafood?" I replied that I did, and he disclosed that he had arranged for us to eat at a restaurant on the Corniche in the Eastern Harbour that served the best local fish as well as anything that swims or lives in the sea.

"So, with us tonight will be Princess Cécile Ali Toussoum and her niece. The Princess is the friend of my friends who I mentioned this morning. She is staying at the Cecil too. She arrived yesterday morning. She is also an ex-Alexandrian. She's French. She was born here, but I think she left when she was very young, after the end of the war. There will also be an English author with us, William Traver. He's quite well known. He has written many books, mostly historical novels. He was in Alexandria for a short time during the war as a pilot with the RAF. I've known him since then. He visits from time to time. I believe he has lived in Greece also – some island of the Southern Sporades. He's staying here too."

After a short while, Sorial stood up to greet William Traver, who had just come down from his room. He introduced us.

"Please, sit down," Sorial invited, "We'll have something to drink before the Princess and her niece arrive." Bill, as Sorial called Traver, seemed to know who would be making up our party that evening. He shook my hand warmly, ordered a whiskey with ice, then looked at me with a smile and said:

"Our friend here tells me you're a 'colleague'; that you're writing a book on Alexandria."

I protested mildly, stressing that I was not an author, but a journalist aspiring to write a simple guide to Alexandria. "If I succeed," I added, "It will be my first, and probably my only book..."

"Yes..." said Traver, adopting a more serious air, "But you know, there's only been one worthwhile guidebook written on Alexandria – '*Alexandria, An History and a Guide* ', by E.M. Forster. Written in 1914, published in 1922, updated in 1938¹. Even today, it continues to be the single serious guide to the city. A guide so well-written that it's not only a reference text on Alexandria, but also a significant literary work."

I told him that the publishers' initial concept had been to bring out a new edition of the renowned guide by Forster, with an additional text written by myself outlining the changes that had taken place in the city, as well as the historical events that had occurred over the last half century. But eventually, the view was taken that a completely new guide should be written, following Forster's methodology, but using my own style of writing.

¹ Followed by two later editions of 1961 and 1982. The latter updated by Durrell.

"I shall follow in Forster's steps," I concluded, "But I shan't copy him in any way."

I must admit that I had taken on the task of writing this book with great hesitation. What I did not tell Traver was that I had not yet given the publishers my final answer. The week ahead was to be an exploratory visit. I would make my decision as I was leaving, and if all went well, as I hoped it would, I planned to return to Alexandria and live here for a few months to write the text of the guidebook.

"I hope you manage it. Good luck." said Bill.

Sorial brought the conversation back into French, the language he preferred, and expressed his conviction that, as an Alexandrian authority on the ancient and modern history of the city, I was the right person to write the guidebook, which was, in his opinion, much needed.

The waiter had just brought the drinks, and even though I was looking out at Saad Zaghloul Square through the large window with my back turned towards the hallway, I felt someone approaching from behind me. The eyes of those sitting at the other tables – both men and women – turned towards the entrance. Sorial and Traver stood up. I turned to see what had caused such curiosity – it was Princess Cécile with her niece Miléna.

The reception areas of the Cecil are neither particularly cheerful nor especially bright. In the long corridor of the ground floor used as a refreshment area and leading to the entrance to the dining room, one finds a mixture of the old décor surviving from the inter-war years together with careless later refurbishment. In these surroundings, Cécile

appeared as a colourful figure on a black and white backdrop. Tall, with blonde hair hanging down, she was wearing a well-tailored red dress decorated with white flowers. I later calculated her age based upon the events that she had lived through. She must have been sixty years old but she did not look it; she glowed with freshness and beauty. She was reminiscent of a glorious, bright-red rose in full bloom; a rose that has blossomed some time ago, and will sadly soon wither.

Cécile was accompanied by her niece, a slim, blue-eyed girl who must have been half her age, but who was eclipsed by her aunt's presence. Milène was her name, but they called her Miléna.

We sat for a while to take an aperitif.

Cécile dominated the group. She spoke beautiful French; slow with just the right pitch so that she could be heard distinctly by all of us without her words spilling over to the surrounding tables. She had arrived just the day before, but had already done so much! With Sorial's help she had rediscovered the Convent School of St. Vincent de Paul that she had attended as a child. She was moved to relate how she had found the schoolyard unchanged; only the trees had grown. She had located her old classroom. She remembered that it was the first class at the rear, to the right of the yard.

"You'll never believe it, but the classroom still has the same desks." She paused and added, "... it's 50 years ago now."

She began to look for a sister who might remember Sœur Geneviève, the sweet nun who had first taught her to read and write. But none of the sisters she asked had been there long enough to remember her. They agreed that they should take her to see *Sœur Dorothée*. They found her sitting surrounded by little Arab girls, pupils in the first grade, who were quietly listening as she told them a fairy tale. The sisters asked her about Sœur Geneviève, interrupting her with all the respect due to a living relic – Sœur Dorothée was almost a hundred years' old.

She took off her glasses carefully, her slow movements dictated by twisted arthritic fingers. She closed the heavy book before her, looked at Cécile thoughtfully, and with her small, blue eyes, sunken into wrinkled sockets, she smiled kindly.

"Sœur Geneviève? Why of course I remember her. When I arrived here from France... yes, it was in 1930... she had already been teaching here for years." She paused a while as if tired by the effort of going back so many years. "But God took her to Him when she was very young, yes, very young, a few years after the war."

Then Sœur Dorothée asked Cécile where she lived now and when she had left Alexandria. She spoke slowly, calmly, with such kindness, softly, as she had told the tale to the children. When it was time for Cécile to leave, she held on to her hand.

"Wait a while, my child, wait a while." She took a round tin box out of the drawer of her desk and handed Cécile a clear, yellow candy.

As Cécile related the story, she emotionally opened her handbag and showed us the candy Sœur Dorothée had given her, like something precious which, as she said, she would never part with. And I thought, as she held the innocent little sweet in the same hand that wore a shining diamond ring: how precious memory is as the years pass by and we look to fleeting moments from the past for consolation.



LITTLE RUTH'S DAY

II

LITTLE RUTH'S DAY

As we had agreed the previous evening, we all met up for lunch at the Cecil's *Jardin* restaurant. Each of us was eager to relate how we had spent our morning. Sorial, with his good-natured, wide smile, was the first to get there. He was followed by Cécile, Miléna and Traver, who arrived together.

The day was warm, as if summer were in a rush to arrive. The sky was a clear blue. A light breeze blew in from the sea and the surface of the water rippled as if it were shivering. From time to time a hint of a cloud appeared unhurriedly from the north, only to dissolve over Lake Mareotis. Even the gulls were too lazy to fly playfully and perched reflectively on the harbour water-breaks.

Cécile and Miléna had visited the Graeco-Roman Museum armed with the antiquated guidebook by Breccia, an edition which, despite being eighty years old, was still useful.

As they were both visiting the Museum for the first time, I asked what had particularly impressed them. Cécile had been enchanted by the Tanagra, the beautiful figurines so full of elegance and grace.

"The heads of the women are so lovely, their hair combed delicately, and those wearing hats are so original, so beautiful. What importance people paid then to beauty, to aesthetic balance. *Quelle beauté...*" Cécile exclaimed, adding that in the courtyard of the Museum she had been touched to see, after so many years, her favourite flower, the 'foll'.

Indeed, on the northern side of the small garden, near to the refreshment stand, there is a large tree which is in bloom at this time of year. The white flowers are called 'foll' in Arabic. They are shaped like jasmine but with petals that are much larger, fleshier and yellowish towards the heart. Their scent is quite exceptional, delicate, sweet as oriental nights. I have never come across this flower anywhere else in Europe. The Alexandrian Greeks call it 'foulli', although it bears no relation to the flower found in Greece of the same name.

I was not surprised that Cécile had rated the Tanagra figurines on a par with the 'foll' growing in the little garden. I remember how, later, I was moved to see the blooms in the garden of the Greek Athletics Club in Chatby. When I smelt the white flowers, memories of people I had thought long forgotten sprang to mind, as well as memories of events I had imagined totally erased long ago, when in fact, they were simply nestling in the heart of a tiny Alexandrian flower.

Miléna in her turn referred to several exhibits that had interested her. She particularly liked a fresco representing two sturdy yoked oxen turning a 'sakieh':

"What confident drawing; sharp brush-strokes, perfect composition, calm earthy colours," Miléna enthused, "It reminded me of the 'Rape of Persephone' that I saw last year at the Royal Tomb of Vergina in Macedonia – something like a forerunner of the works of Tiepolo."

That morning Traver had visited the excavations at Kom el Dikka:

"The area is unrecognisable," he said in surprise, "I remember the hill topped by the Napoleonic fortress. During the war, we had heavy antiaircraft guns up there. But it's all been levelled."

Sorial explained that at the beginning of the '60s a Polish archaeological mission had undertaken to excavate the area. For at least 100 years it had been rumoured that somewhere near to the Nabi Danial mosque, at the foot of the hill, the Tomb of Alexander the Great was to be found. They dug away at the mound until it had literally been levelled. Kom el Dikka was gone. It was established that the hill had been created from soil and various debris that had accumulated over the ages. In the upper layers they had found Islamic graves, which explained the earlier name of the hill – Kom el Demas – the hill of corpses – but nowhere had they found the tomb of Alexander the Great. Then they began to dig below the level of the modern-day city. Nothing. They continued to dig even deeper until they came upon a whole neighbourhood with houses, baths, a

beautiful little theatre, which might have been an open-air *Bouleutirion*, a Parliament House – all buildings from the post-Roman years, the 4th and 5th centuries AD. Nothing connected with the Alexandria of the Ptolemies, nothing connected with the 'Soma', the mausoleum of Alexander the Great that the Great City continued to jealously guard.

"Sometime we'll get back to that tomb which is veiled in mystery," said Sorial with a broad smile. "And what about you?" He asked me.

"Something strange happened to me." I said, "It's a sad story, touching, beautiful."

I had wanted to visit the Jewish cemetery because the mediaeval city-walls passed very near, but left it out of the fortifications. The Arab city, as it declined, no longer required the original ancient fortifications; it was not necessary to enclose such a vast area as that of the Graeco-Roman times. Even the smaller Byzantine fortifications were more than enough. So the eastern Islamic walls were moved further west, as far as the present-day Municipal Stadium and the Shallalat Gardens, where one of the most important gates to the city used to be. Western visitors had used its ancient name: the Canopic Gate, but the Arabs called it the Rashid Gate: 'Bab Rashid', or 'Bab el Shark'i, the Eastern Gate. It was preserved until the end of the last century, when the last standing of the city walls and gates were destroyed in 1882. Today, there are still some remains in the Shallalat Gardens, next to the Municipal Stadium.

In the Chatby district, where all the cemeteries of the non-Muslims are located, the fortification wall ran west towards the hill of Kom el Dikka and followed the contemporary southern boundaries of the old Jewish cemetery.

In the middle of that cemetery, there stands a granite column. I thought I should dedicate a few words to it in my book.

There was a young Egyptian archaeologist who was eager to accompany me. The good Sorial had called upon him to escort me to archaeological sites, mosques and the old Arab quarters.

"Hosni is a good lad," Sorial had said, and indeed he turned out to be a helpful guide.

All cemeteries, with the exception of ancient ones, make me feel tight in the chest. To me, though, ancient cemeteries are like monuments – I am not disturbed by the presence of the graves. The mystery of the return to the earth has already been consummated there. But other burial grounds bring me down to earth with a harsh truth that I do not wish to consider: the fate which awaits the body that we so carefully tend. I am frightened by the thought that, beneath the visible world, the opposite of the process of creation is going on. There, I feel the silent hum of a myriad of particles marching towards nothingness... or towards a new beginning. The only reassuring maxim, that of Lavoisier: "Nothing is lost, nothing is created."

These were my thoughts as I entered the old cemetery. As you step through the gate you are confronted with an image of neglect. An Egyptian warden in a grubby

gallabeya, followed by his inquisitive wife and their brood of children, came wading through the earth and mud to find out what we wanted.

He asked Hosni if I was a 'Yehudi', if I was one of the few Jews who, fifty years after being uprooted from the earth where they had lived for generations, had returned to pray at the gravesides of their ancestors.

He was chatty and without waiting for a reply added:

"Whole years go by without even one visitor showing up. There are only a handful of Jews left in the city. They're all old. When they die, they take them to the new Jewish cemetery or to Israel.

"A few years ago they came and emptied a lot of graves and took the bones – some to Israel, some to France, others to Italy. Those that are left are the forgotten ones..."

Hosni interrupted him by showing his identity card proving him to be a member of the Archaeological Service. He discreetly put it back into his pocket making way for me to walk towards the tombs.

The warden bowed obsequiously and assured us that he was at our disposal, adding – something that made me shudder – that we should 'make ourselves at home'.

We began to make our difficult way through the graves. The warden had not been exaggerating when he said that it had been many years since the paths had been used. Weeds with huge thorns had grown up all around, blocking our way like vegetal watchdogs. The bougainvillea, also running wild, had joined in too, the thorns of the gnarled branches reinforcing the barrier.

Far off, in the heart of the cemetery, the granite column that with time had become one, had become entwined with the place, stood impassively, desperately alone. But it was one thing to see it and quite another to reach it; we were separated by so many graves, and a labyrinth of barbed paths.

Gingerly we moved between the tombs set out like large marble matchboxes placed on a funereal chessboard. We trod where the thorns reached only to our knees, avoiding the tracks that were impassable.

As we walked, we came across more and more open, empty graves with broken headstones and disturbed earth. These were the graves from which, as the warden had told us, the remains had been removed; the dead had been taken away to the new lands of their descendants. Just as in ancient times when a tribe moved on to new lands, they took with them their holy vessels, the bones of their forefathers and a little of the soil that they were leaving behind them forever.

How closely man is bound to his roots, how firmly attached he is to the earth, I thought! He looks to the heavens to find his gods, but it is deeply rooted in the earth that he belongs.

However carefully we walked, our clothes were soon covered with thorns that pricked us all over, but we were guided by the dispassionate monolithic column that drew us on. There was no shade anywhere for us to rest in, to take shelter from the harsh midday sun that had joined ranks

with the weeds and thorns as if to deter the progress of the intruders.

We quietly persisted in our efforts, from time to time reading the inscriptions on the headstones. Only a few were written in Hebrew – the others were in French, Italian, occasionally Spanish and even German, as if they wished to commemorate the dead loved ones in the language that was most comfortable to them. But the Star of David could be seen everywhere, carved above every inscription, a sign like a promise that joined all the children of Israel in their rest.

“Rachel, tender mother, perfect wife...” a date for her birth and another for her death. A whole life in just a few words. And there followed a supplication: “Pray for her.” “Elijah... loving husband, good father, devoted son 1.2.1888 – 12.5.1930. Pray for him.” And more inscriptions and more epitaphs of praise and more requests for prayer.

It was as if suddenly, as the deceased passed through the gate of death, they all became good, exemplary people; but to placate a demanding God, they required the prayers of the living. On those uncertain paths, it was better to have some prayers to accompany you. And the two of us walked on in impotent silence. One a Christian by faith, the other a Muslim, surrounded by a multitude of Hebrew souls.

Had the sun risen higher in the sky? Was it the despair caused by the onslaught of the thorns? Was it the persistence of so many souls hoping, insisting on prayer? There came a time when I felt that the dry weeds of the

paths were in communion with the underworld, the twigs and the thorns reaching out like deformed arms. They came out of the earth like a plant from its roots, but they were not plants, they were the hopeless grappling of those who no one remembered any more. And the sorrow, mute and unbearable, that accompanied the last words of those who had loved them, the words: "Pray for him" "Pray for her" became "Pray for me, pray for me... Don't leave... Everyone has forgotten us."

If the path had been clear, if we had not been trapped in the hopelessness of that abandoned place, we would have run for the gate to escape the oppressive presence of the souls, but we were powerless as we eyed the unapproachable column that continued to watch us from its grand, Corinthian capital. As we neared, it had become massive, just as the bougainvillea that tightly, protectively embraced it, had become huge, gigantic.

We had come to a part of the graveyard containing monumental tombs. Few had chosen to differentiate their loved ones in death, to place them in more expensive, impressive, elaborate tombs, to declare that in this world they had been outstanding, wealthy.

We paused to read the nearest epitaph inscribed on the marble. It was that of a twelve year old little girl. In just a few words carved on the hard stone was all the despair of a mother who refused to believe that what was most precious to her had been for ever taken away. The same supplication and the same question followed: Why does no one pray any more? Why have we been forgotten?

Hosni hesitated. We could go no further. We could get no closer to the granite column. The menacing thorns of the bougainvillea forbade it. We had to turn back. Behind us, the pleading souls awaited us.

The young archaeologist asked me: "Aren't you going to pray?" He said this more as an appeal than a question.

Disconcerted, I replied in a few brief words that it had been years since I had prayed... I did not know what else to say.

Then, looking around briefly to get his bearings, he located the direction of Mecca. Kicking aside the brambles in a small clearing behind us, he unfolded his newspaper and spread it on the ground like a prayer mat. I gave him the French newspaper I had bought that morning and he lay that on top.

It was 12 noon, and as the poet of Granada would say, it was 12 noon by all the clocks in the city. From a distant minaret the muezzin began to call the faithful of Allah to mid-day prayer, and my Egyptian guide began to pray. It seemed to me to go on forever. He knelt, he looked forward, he lowered his head, touched his forehead to the ground. He stood up, stood erect, knelt once more. And as I stood a few paces away, powerless, overcome, I reread the inscribed lament for little Ruth who had passed on at the beginning of the century, but who still persisted, like a mischievous child, in asking for her prayer.

THE UNFORTUNATE SCRIBE'S III THE UNFORTUNATE SCRIBE'S DAY

Gomrok is one of the most interesting parts of modern-day Alexandria. As its name suggests, it borders upon the Customs area of the Western Harbour, the fourth largest port in the Mediterranean.

We had decided to eat at a well-known fish restaurant in Anfoushi, a working class neighbourhood near to the harbour. We felt like walking, so we set off through the complex maze of alleyways making up the district that in ancient times had been the narrow strip of land of the Heptastadion. We began our stroll from the Old Customs Street, *Sharaa Gomrok el Adim*.

It was Dinocrates who had thought to build a huge embankment, seven stadia long – that is, some 1,200 metres – to bridge the sea and join the Pharos Island to the mainland. In this way, the long, narrow island, with the protection that it offered from the northern winds, would create two ports: the “Eunostos” , the Port of the good

return, in the west, the “Megas Limin”, the *Portus Magnus*, in the east. But over time, the waters of the Nile began to deposit silt on both sides of the Heptastadion, which at first created small sandbanks. The sandbanks gradually became islets that, from the 10th century onwards, joined up to create a wide stretch of land. And so all traces of the Heptastadion were lost, and from the 15th century we find the “New City”, the mediaeval city of Alexandria, outside the ancient city walls.

It was noon, and quite warm. As we wandered along, we were amazed to see that, just a few minutes walk from the bustling city centre, this part of Alexandria had remained lost, forgotten in the Dark Ages: dirt roads with no pavements, that had never known the luxury of asphalt, where the pedestrian has to watch his footing, sometimes stepping in puddles of mud, sometimes kicking up clouds of dust. Few roads are wide enough to take a car or cart. There are narrow alleyways everywhere – a chaos of urban-planning – and no straight roads at all. The alleyways wind like snails around the walls of the motley buildings.

Shacks adjoin brick hovels, and then suddenly, out of the muddiness, appears a three-story *okella* that, although wretched in appearance, many years ago must have stood proud and tall. A little further on, an antiquated minaret is tilting so much that in a few years, or a few months, it will surely have to be pulled down.

You feel as if time has been turned back and that you are experiencing a different Alexandria, one that is hundreds

of years away from the end of the millennium, as if God has upturned his hourglass.

The inhabitants of the area crowd together – along with goats, piglets, hens, geese, ducks and swarms of flies – in a happy daze that takes the foreign visitor by surprise.

In silence, we walked along, each deep in his own thoughts, gazing curiously at the mosaic of contrasting images.

When Cécile spoke, she found nothing more appropriate to say than to ask Sorial why there were so many piglets around in an Arab district, where pork was forbidden by the Prophet. Sorial replied that it was forbidden to eat pork, but not to breed pigs. The Muslims bred them and sold them to the Copts, who, as Christians, were not bound by the laws of the Koran.

After a brief saunter, we arrived at the restaurant and sat in a small square where a few wobbly chairs awaited us. Seeing the uncertainty with which we regarded the place we had ventured to eat in, Sorial attempted to reassure us saying that the fish there was excellent and there was no need to be concerned.

The food Sorial ordered took a long time to arrive, as it was all charcoal-grilled to order. To pass the time while we waited, he asked us how we had spent our morning.

I had had a strange experience with a mummy. I explained that the mummy was quite different from those you see in museums.

Cécile hastened to tell us that she had seen five or six mummies at the Graeco-Roman Museum. She said it was

the ancient Egyptian custom of embalming their dead that had caused her to so abhor Pharaonic antiquities since childhood.

"I can't stand such a cadaverous society. Embalmed people, embalmed animals, reptiles, birds... even embalmed fish... My God!" she cried, "*Oh mon Dieu!*" and with disgust she pressed a palm first to her forehead and then over her closed eyes, as if trying to exorcise the hideous image of protracted death.

Without disagreeing with her, Traver remarked that it was not only the ancient Egyptians who were obsessed by the idea of an afterlife and went to great lengths to preserve the body for the promised return of the soul:

"In fact it's very rare to find a religion that does not promise some sort of continuation after death, whether you call it resurrection, reincarnation, or rebirth..."

"Yes, yes," replied Cécile, "But only the ancient Egyptians took to embalming with such gusto."

"Undeniably," agreed Traver, "When we speak of mummies we automatically think of the Land of the Nile, but in Central America and in Asia too, man felt the need to protect his soulless body from the ravages of time."

"I wonder," added Miléna, who for some time had wanted to join in the conversation, "What it was that impelled the Egyptians for over 3,000 years to so stubbornly persist in that custom? After all, embalming was continued by the Copts. Egyptians, people with such a glorious civilisation, with such great knowledge – knowledge that astounds us even today: astronomy, mathematics, mechanics, architecture,

administration... how could they have believed that by preserving the body, that perishable wrapping, that the soul – the Kâ – could one day inhabit it again? Didn't the rulers and priests know that the mummies of their distant ancestors lay soullessly in their luxurious tombs, with their lifeless companions and uneaten food?"

"How could they have known?" Cécile asked curiously, "The tombs were sealed fast, and most of them were hidden, secret."

"They knew," Miléna insisted, "Because there were tomb robbers even back then. Countless tombs were robbed soon after the burial of the dead, so they must have known – at least the ruling classes must have known."

Sorial interrupted them, seeing that before I had even begun to tell of my experience, the subject was being changed, "Let's allow our 'author' to tell us about his mummy. I'm curious to hear where he found a mummy other than in the Graeco-Roman Museum." He said this as if slightly vexed that such an important discovery had escaped his attention.

"However strange it may sound," I told them, "There is a mummy right in the centre of the city, in the loft of a curiosity shop in Fouad Street. I met the owner of the shop yesterday. He's a Greek, from a family that's been in Alexandria for generations. He took over the shop from his father-in-law, who inherited it from his father before him. I remembered the antiquated shop, even though it is 40 years since I was last there. Nothing has changed – it's just as it was back then, as if time had stood still.

"I called in to the shop early this morning to continue a conversation I had left unfinished with the proprietor. He offered me coffee, and we talked about the past, about the war years, which were before his time – he's much younger than I am. He's a well-read man, with a particular love of the history of the city and of archaeology. He began to show me around the shop, describing the various old objects that were lying around. Just as I was about to leave, he hesitated and seemed to be making a big decision. Then he gestured to his wife to mind the shop, adding, 'We're going up into the loft.' She nodded as if to say, all right, off you go.

"'Come with me,' he went on, 'Follow me, it's dark up there. I'll go first to turn on the light. I've got something to show you that's sure to interest you.'

"I followed him. Slowly, we climbed the wooden staircase that creaked in protest as we disturbed its peace. A small door opened grudgingly, a bare light bulb was lit. The sickly light dimly illuminated a large, low-ceilinged space packed with all sorts of indiscriminate objects: wobbly exhausted armchairs, piles of old books, damaged side-tables, deformed empty étagères, heavy frames, gaping emptily. Over there, a richly decorated camel-saddle kept company with two huge cracked porcelain vases. There was a painted plaster Negro, with eyes staring wide as if startled by the sudden light. Atop a disembowelled winged armchair were strewn a jumble of all kinds of old hats. On the opposite wall was a portrait of a preened, bewhiskered Alexandrian townsman – his lapel heavily decorated

with medals – beside his plump wife. And there was dust everywhere. The unnaturally thick layer of dust covered everything, as if it had been carefully sprayed on, like on a film set. And with every step, you had to push aside the tenacious webs of the spiders.

“It occurred to me that, either it must have been many years since anyone had come up here, or the spiders must have gone about the weaving of their webs with enormous zeal. As if reading my thoughts, my guide assured me, as he sidled past an old double-barrelled shotgun, that he had last been up here just a month ago, with a French archaeologist.

“‘The darned things,’ he went on, ‘As soon as you chase them off, they get right back to spinning their webs.’

“Just then, as if to emphasise its presence, a little mouse ran out from a jumbled pile of old photographs. Unhurriedly, he pattered towards us, paused, looked at us defiantly as if to say ‘catch me if you can’, and then disappeared into the holes his friends had gnawed in a large, multicoloured, arabesque Bedouin tent that was folded up into a great pile of dusty canvas.

“Ignoring the mouse, we continued to carefully make our way through the maze of neglected objects of yesteryear, retired witnesses to a long-gone age. For me, it was like meeting up with old acquaintances. Look! Wasn’t that old Underwood over there my very first typewriter, the one my Uncle Vizvikis gave me? Wasn’t it on that typewriter that I had learned touch-typing? That blue hat with the silken bow, the fine tulle and the canvas flowers – isn’t that the

one my mother wore at my cousin Penelope's wedding? I remember I cried that day because she had promised to wait for me to grow up and marry me. She had lied. Lying over there was our old ice-cream maker. The gears that turned the wooden whisk to mix the frozen water-ice were rusted up now. And there's our coffee grinder, tarnished and covered in green blotches... How did that get here? During the war-years, when coffee was scarce, we used to mix it with roasted barley. And over there, our old film camera – not the electric one my father bought for us on the day the war ended, but the one Aunt Ioli had given me – the manual one with the crank handle. Our neighbour, Artin, I recall, taught me how to turn it with a steady rhythm so that the images wouldn't move too slowly or run too fast.

“My host recalled me from this ramble around the memories of my childhood, when, as we reached a corner of the loft, without a word he reached out and pointed to a wooden sarcophagus.

“At this point, I should explain that absolutely everything about the mummy inside that sarcophagus was unusual, strange. Quite besides the very fact that it is unheard of to find a mummy in the loft of a shop, the embalmed ancient Egyptian was placed inside a anthropomorphous wooden sarcophagus without the usual intricate, flimsy wrapping. In museums you find mummies lying down in a horizontal position, giving the impression that the dead person is at rest. Here, the sarcophagus was standing upright, leaning

against a wall, fitted with large modern hinges to allow the lid to be opened easily.

“The light from the small lamp was too weak to reach that corner of the loft, which remained in shadow. So my companion prudently withdrew a torch from his pocket, grinned, and shone its light upon the outside of the sarcophagus lid. From the depths of time emerged the faded, multicoloured hieroglyphics, scarabs and birds that had accompanied the dead man.

“One by one, the beam from the torch illuminated the mysterious symbols. In a low voice, my guide began to read the inscription – or at least he appeared to be reading – he told me later that he had learned the text of the inscription off by heart. And so I learned that the sarcophagus contained the body of Psamtek-Senb, Scribe to a famous nobleman from Sais, who had lived in the 6th century BC, during the 26th Dynasty. How on earth did he memorise all that – right down to the name of the dead man’s mother, Herut-Tawy. After that, there was a lot more writing about the dead man, all very flattering. It was all about the identity of the mummy, and must have been intended to avoid any confusion about who the dead person was, so that no mistake would be made at the time when the soul would return to the body.

“And then it was time for the sarcophagus to be opened, with long, drawn out creaking of the rusty hinges. Unconsciously, I took a step back. The size of the sarcophagus had prepared me for the sight of a Goliath, at least two metres tall. From previous visits to museums,

I was expecting to see a body tightly swathed in endless gauze seeped in pitch and other embalming substances. So imagine my surprise when the lid was opened and the form of a naked man appeared before me. He was short, almost a midget, and totally covered in pitch. I shivered. For some unknown reason, after the discovery of the mummy, someone had removed all the gauze bandages that had protected the body, leaving the once stately dignitary like a stark naked, hideous gnome.

“Overcoming my initial repugnance I realised that I was being given a unique opportunity to see the embalmed body of a 2,500 year-old Egyptian up close. I took the offered torch and began to examine the mummified body. His face was ghastly – one eye was closed, while the other, half-open, seemed to be looking around to see what was going on. Through his parted lips stuck sparse, protruding, crooked teeth that added to the grossness of the face. It seems that the Scribe had died young, as he still had all his teeth and quite a lot of hair, which was tinged with henna. His skeletal hands must once have been crossed over his chest, but when the bandages had been sacrilegiously removed, they had fallen free. So they just hung there self-consciously, as if waiting to hug someone. His nails, as often happens, had continued to grow after death. They were long, threatening, and blackened too with pitch.

“Curiosity overcame my repugnance and I continued to examine the mummy. Around his waist was tied a cloth apron. It was old, but not ancient, so I asked how it came to be there. I was told that it had been put there so that he

would not be seen 'starkers': 'You see, occasionally, ladies come up here, and it wouldn't be right for them to see him like that... But people are curious.' My guide added with a mischievous grin, 'And sometimes they take a peep under the apron.'

"As he said this, he pulled up the hem of the apron and revealed how it was that the unfortunate Egyptian came to be standing up. The apron had been covering, apart from his withered private parts, a metal hoop that was wrapped around his waist like a belt and, as it was attached to the sarcophagus, forced him to assume an upright position. I felt so sorry for him.

"The poor wretch, I thought. What a terrible fate! Although he had been short, feeble and ugly in life, he had managed to reach a respectable position. They had buried him with honours and written flattering words upon his sarcophagus. How could he have imagined what fate held in store for him as he awaited the Second Coming!

"As if to console him for his post-mortem misfortune, I reflected that things might have been much worse had he been born some centuries later and sanctified – piece by piece, monasteries and churches would have cut him up and laid claim to his feet, hands, fingers, as sacred relics. You poor soul, I said, at least as a mummy you have remained intact in one piece.

"Just imagine if on Judgement Day the unfortunate Scribe should present himself at the Gates of Paradise and Saint Peter should say to him: 'I'm sorry, my friend, but you can't come in here just like that. You're one of the unfortunate

ones born before Christ. You'll have to go to Purgatory for a while first, and then we'll see. We'll talk again...'

"And in reply, I can imagine the poor devil complaining: 'But Peter, I spent years in purgatory in the attic of a shop in Fouad Street, with mice scuttling around me day and night, and awful people sneaking a look under that damned apron all the time and snickering. Isn't that enough of purgatory?'"

Traver chortled, but then fell silent for a while. Sorial wanted to hear more about the place where the mummy was kept. He asked for the address, the name of the shop and of the owner. As was his way, he noted all the information carefully down in a little notebook that he carried around in his pocket at all times.

Miléna asked if she might go one day to see the mummy. Traver hastened to say that he was also interested in paying a visit. Uneasily, Cécile wondered if she should try to overcome the fear that my story had evoked in her and join the curious group.

"I really don't know," she said thoughtfully, "Whether it's right to disturb the peace of the dead." And as if searching for some other argument to add, went on, "You know, all those ancient relics are seeped in magic, in evil powers, because during their burial, secret ceremonies were carried out. I think it'd be better if we went to visit the church of Saint Saba. It's a really ancient building, hallowed by centuries of prayer. I read somewhere that the marble slab on which Saint Catherine was beheaded is to be found there. The old church used to belong to an Orthodox monastery," she

added, "But what does that matter? We're all Christians, aren't we? What does it matter if we're Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox?"

Sorial suggested that we might combine the two visits, as the shop in Fouad Street was just five minutes away from Saint Saba's. He knew a great deal about the old church, which was supported by ancient granite columns.

"Don't be scared," said Traver with an ironic smile, "Mummies are harmless, and as for their burial ceremonies, they were neither more unusual nor more mystical than ours. Man's anguish is still the same – he's still searching for signs of where he came from, why he's on this earth, what will happen after his death. He quakes in the face of the unknown that waits on the other side. He has an opinion about everything, he knows something about everything on this earth – but nothing at all about what comes after, other than that death awaits him. There's nothing more certain in this life than its end, death. After that..."

Sorial shook his head in manner that suggested that he too had doubts about 'after that'...

"But, my friends, aren't you Christians?" retorted Cécile, looking in turn from Sorial to Traver, as if pitying their lack of faith, "Christians know that all does not end here, there is an afterlife... the true, eternal life."

"That's not just the prerogative of Christian faiths. All religions make some promise of a continuation after death. But how I would like to be certain of that..." Traver said quietly, "At the funerals I attend – and unfortunately, I seem to be going to funerals more and more often these days –

the weeping and wailing of the relatives and friends is no comfort to me at all. If all good Christians, faithful Muslims and devout Jews were so sure of things to come, would they behave like that? I have my doubts. I'm not sure of anything. I question everything. I'm afraid of death just as I'm afraid of the dark. And I'm not afraid of what there might be beyond death, but afraid that there might be a complete absence of being. I can imagine Paradise, without getting carried away by the promise of it... I can imagine the tortures of Hell, and it doesn't disturb me particularly. But what really scares me is nothingness – just try to imagine a void... nothing... not a thing." He said this slowly, hanging on every word, "Not - a - thing. I believe that anyone who actually managed to grasp the idea would go crazy; he'd lose his mind, if only for a while. All religions attempt to fill that void, to convince us that there is something beyond – that we do not stop here. And it's a good job they do, because if we were to accept that everything does stop here, life would have no meaning. And so the wise and holy men try their best to help man to go on living, waiting to become eternal.

"So many wise books have been written," he went on, "So very much has been written, and so much more will be written in an attempt to explain what has been written before. But, you see, I believe that the theories so often clash and contradict each other. Millions of Buddhist souls are set free to reincarnation, while the ashes of cremated bodies are scattered into the muddy waters of the Ganges, and millions of Christians are rotting in the earth awaiting the

Second Coming. At the same time, in hidden tombs along the banks of the Nile, on the peaks of the Andes and the steppes of Asia, thousands of mummies wait resignedly for their own resurrection. And the souls of a myriad of African Negroes have been waiting for the same promise of a new life ever since their distant ancestors first stood upright and began human thought. All men have doubts and fears. All men hope that their god will keep his promise. They all pray that he will not abandon them. What is the truth?

“Shouldn't the truth be simple, understandable to all creatures? Why would an ill-tempered Creator make things so complicated that we should need prophets and mystics to explain them to us? How can a creation be perfect when not even the reason for its creation is understood? How can the Creator be perfect when his creations are imperfect? When he hurls them out to search hither and thither, ricocheting off endless obstacles of doubt in a crazy game of blind-man's buff. I believe that the only miserable creature in all creation is man. Because only man searches for answers. The other creatures don't possess intellect, so they don't think, they don't speculate, they don't ask questions. They walk upon the ground that belongs to them, unquestioning, expecting nothing. I would even venture to say that man is unsuited to this world, he is unhappy because he is made up of two conflicting components: the flesh that is of this world, and is the godsend of the animal, and the soul that sends him off into other dimensions. It's his soul that torments him. Who decided, when was it decided, to implant knowledge into the evolution of the ape? Before

that, he lived in Heaven on Earth from which, as the Holy Scriptures tell us, he was expelled with the acquisition of knowledge.

“Which truth is true? What is the truth?”; “Is there a truth?”

Miléna, who took Traver’s ponderings to be an actual question, replied:

“When we search for the truth, we find it,” and calling upon what little knowledge she had of the Holy Scriptures, she quoted phrases she had learned off by heart at Sunday school: “Ask and ye shall be given...” and other such words of comfort. Miléna was not religious, and never went to church other than to attend weddings, baptisms and occasional funerals. And yet she was unnerved by the thought that she might lose the crutch, however weak and wobbly, that belief in the religion she had inherited offered her. It was enough for her.

“Oh my dear girl,” said Traver, stroking his little beard, “Where have I not looked... and how many times after persistent searching have I not thought that I have finally found the truth. I stayed on Mount Athos for a year until at last I said: Now I understand everything. The altitude is so high up there that you seem to communicate with God. So it was with faith and absolute certainty that I descended the mountain and went out once again into the world. But the doubts soon came back to gnaw at my insides again like snakes. Then, while I was travelling, I met a wise man from India. I was charmed by the serenity he emanated. After endless sleepless nights in the stern of the ocean

liner asking him incessant questions, and receiving wise responses, I gave up everything – I was married then – and stayed for another year in a wonderful ashram just outside Benares. I lived close to a Great Master, a marvellous holy man, wise, saintly, and I learned a great deal about love. I was impressed to hear that he had visited Athos, the Holy Mount and wondered what he had been doing in a Holy Christian community. He read the question in my thoughts and, as if we were continuing some conversation that we had begun previously, he said: ‘Search for what unites you with people, not what divides you’.

When I returned to the world once again, some said that my senses had been dulled, others that I had been sanctified, and myself, I believed that this time I held the truth firmly within me. I even began to feel the need to share it with others.

“But it wasn’t long before circumstances forced me to take up the quest once more. At first it was nothing more than a mere suspicion that I brushed aside because I was comfortable, settled with my truth. You see, I had the satisfaction of being able to pass my knowledge on to others, I felt useful, I was helping my fellow man to find the true path. Then the suspicions became doubts. I began to ask myself once more if things were really as I thought them to be... And just when I thought I had reached the end of my path that was when I realised that I was right back from where I had started.

“I went everywhere. I talked to so many people. From the witch-doctors of the Dogon tribe of Central Africa (who

convinced me that with the naked eye they receive the same signals from Sirius that scientists obtain with electronic telescopes), to the enlightened Muslims of Thrace, the whirling dervishes of the Orient, the mystical orders of Upper Egypt who preserve – or so they claim – the wisdom of the ancient tribes of the Valley of the Nile.

“And I devoured books. You've never seen so many books... whole libraries of them. From Patristic writings, Thomas of Aquinas, to Edouard Schuré, Elena Blavatski, Alice Bailey, Krishnamourti, Nietzsche... But instead of finding answers to the questions that tormented me, the knowledge I acquired presented me with new doubts. And each time I believed I had finally found the truth, I was suddenly back where I had started from once more.

“It was then that I understood the wisdom of the phrase: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven’. But that didn't answer any of my questions, it simply calmed me for a while.”

We were left speechless by Traver's words. We knew him as a fearless pilot, a great sailor, a successful writer, a thoughtful, concerned intellectual, but we had not suspected his long quest for thou know thyself.

Cécile seemed to have withdrawn from the conversation. She could no longer play a leading role in it and, after all, she was not particularly interested in the topic of discussion. She rather wished the subject had been closed along with the lid of the sarcophagus. Obviously contrite, because it was she who had opened up these untrodden paths, she tried to change the subject. She wanted to talk about the

old buildings we saw standing tall all around the small square where we were sitting – or perhaps we should call it a mere clearing in the heavily built-up labyrinth of motley buildings that surely dated back to Ottoman times. But the others were not of the same mind. Even Miléna, to whom Cécile looked for support, pretended not to understand, and the conversation, which had hung in mid-air like a pendulous spider pausing in the spinning of her web, began again.

Sorial returned to talk of the mummies, describing the awful fate of those that had been discovered before archaeologists came along to protect them in museums and storerooms. Either he did not notice, or pretended not to notice Cécile's grimaces – she had just begun to eat her fish. With the usual excessive gestures that he always made when a subject enthralled him, Sorial told of how, in the Middle Ages, embalmed body parts were ground up into 'mummy powder' – much in demand in Christian Europe, where it was called *mumia*, and was believed to have magical healing qualities. Hundreds of Egyptian mummies were shipped to the west, to end up at the hands of charlatans, as an elixir in the private apartments of some lady of the manor, wife of a respected crusader. The hunt for 'mummy powder' was just another aspect of relic worship which, even today, has not totally died out.

The faithful would never believe how many hands, feet, fingers, heads and other macabre relics of 'saints', reverently tended in elaborate and cherished shrines, are in fact the body parts of these wretched Egyptians.

“Of course, the Copts too played their part,” added Sorial – not wishing to leave his own out of things. “Embalming, as I’m sure you know, was carried on for some centuries afterwards by the Christians of Egypt, and the vast Coptic cemeteries of Fayoum and Arsinoe were easily accessible to the body snatchers who supplied the ‘mummy powder’ and ‘holy relics’. True faith worked so many miracles – for surely faith can move mountains – simply by touching the remains of ancient Egyptians who had worshipped Ammon or Aton.

“What a creature man is,” he added, his face a picture of disappointment, “He will trade on anything, hope, ignorance, fear, the uncertainty that obsesses us, as our friend Bill so rightly said.”

I added my opinion that as long as man is alive, he has the ability to do both good and evil, but once he passes through the gateway to the other world that ends – he has no part to play with the living. He cannot influence them, and they can offer him nothing.

“But you’re overlooking the role of prayer,” Cécile said, pushing aside her plate, from where the head of her half-eaten fish stared meanly up at her. “Everything that happens after death, ceremonies, prayer for the peace of the soul, everything – you think all that is a waste of time, useless? Don’t tell me you even agree with the cremation of the dead?”

Seeing that I did not reply to her question, and that Cécile was in fact looking towards him and not at me, Traver said:

“So if we are to agree that there is an afterlife for that which we choose to call the soul, would it not be wrong for the prayers of the living to play a part in ensuring the better treatment of the soul? Let's agree for the moment that there is a Heaven and a Hell,” but he said this in a way that left no doubt that he himself believed no such thing, “And let's assume that the Hour of Judgement has arrived. Judgement should be based upon what each person did during the course of his life. It's not fair that a soul prayed for by many people over a long period of time, for whom Sanctus were read at memorial services and candles were lit, should be judged any differently than those who left no-one behind to care about them, to pray for them. How can a God that we try to influence with such ploys be fair? God can not be all-knowing and almighty, and at the same time be taken in by such wheedling. You see, we keep trying to bring God down to our own level, to our own limited range. We've shrunk him to the point that we've made him human; we have endowed him with all our own imperfections, all our own defects.

“The way we've made him, he's neither almighty, nor just, nor compassionate. I'm not saying that there isn't a God, I'm not saying that I don't believe in God, it's just that I believe that God is something so immense that it cannot fit inside the human mind. Just think of the ants that toil to make their subterranean corridors, coming and going in ranks, exemplary in their obedience to age-old rules. Man comes along and carelessly steps on their work, savagely scattering the fruits of their labour. What would the ants

say if they could think? That a cataclysm had occurred? That some angry god was punishing them, and all sorts of other nonsense. Because the ants are so tiny and weak in comparison to man, that they can't comprehend his actions; they simply sense his presence. And yet ants existed before man, and the difference between them is comparable and understandable. There's no means of comparing man with what he calls God. We don't have the ability to understand him, we simply suspect his existence."

Cécile remarked that we could have waited until we had finished our meal before discussing mummies and all the other 'interesting' subjects that had followed. She said this quite sarcastically, expressing her repugnance towards the topic that had been chosen for a lunchtime chat.

We had reached the dessert, a huge selection of various fruits that arrived at our table in successive waves. It seemed that the conversation the unfortunate Scribe had triggered would end on a sweeter note.

But Miléna came back to the subject of mummies and tombs, almost as if she were doing so intentionally to vex her aunt. She reminded Sorial of his promise to tell us about the tomb of Alexander the Great and to take us to the crypt under the mosque which legend identified with the mausoleum of the founder of Alexandria.

Sorial was enthusiastic. His face shone with satisfaction. It seemed that the mystery of the lost tomb was one of his favourite subjects.

"Would you like to visit the vault of the Nabi Daniai mosque later this afternoon?" he asked, and receiving an

immediate positive response from all, he stood up, saying:

"In that case, please excuse me. I have to phone a friend of mine in the Islamic Monuments Department. He'll send us a guide."

I had read a great deal about the tomb of Alexander the Great, but I had never been down into the vaults of Nabi Danial. The subject, of course, interested me, and if I were to go ahead and write my 'guidebook', I would have to devote some pages to that mythical monument.

In a few minutes, Sorial returned looking pleased with himself and said, "By the time we've taken coffee at the Cecil, Hosni will be there to meet us." And to me he added, "He's the young archaeologist who took you round the Jewish cemetery yesterday. Let's go to *Monty's Bar* at the Cecil. It's quiet there. I'll tell you the legend and the historical facts of the mysterious burial of the Macedonian hero.

We walked a while to digest the mixture of fish, tales of mummies and ruminations of the beyond that lay heavily on our stomachs. The sun was shining, a pleasant breeze blew in from the Eastern Harbour, cooling our way until we reached Sorial's car and he took us back to the hotel. As we passed through the reception, we left a message to say that if anyone should ask for us, we would be in *Monty's Bar*.

Monty's Bar, situated in the mezzanine of the Cecil, is a pleasant, low-ceilinged room, decorated in Art Deco style. 'Monty' was the nickname of Field Marshal Sir Montgomery of Alamein, as history remembers him. It was said that during

the war he stayed many times at the Cecil, and that the bar had been named after him in his honour.

They did not usually serve coffee in the bar, but such restrictions did not apply to Sorial. So, lounging comfortably in a corner of Monty's waiting for Sorial to begin his story, I tried to imagine what the place had been like during the Second World War: officers coming and going, drinking to forget the absence of their loved ones, nostalgic for their far-off homelands, fearful of death that lay in wait around every corner, never knowing when their turn would come.

When the coffee arrived in tiny copper coffee-pots accompanied by small, thick cups, Sorial paid the bill so that we would not be interrupted by the chatty waiter who fussed incessantly around us. At this time of day the bar was empty. We were the only patrons.

"Bon, fine," said Sorial, when he saw that we were all sitting comfortably around the low table. And he began to relate his story. He took us back to the death of Alexander the Great in Babylon, in the summer of 323 BC. "It was the eighteenth of the month of Daesios when he died. He was just 33, and yet he had already conquered the greater part of the then known world."

Just then, the pianist arrived in a breathless rush. Goodness knows where they had dug him up from and 'ordered' him to go and play. Monty's bar was known as a Piano Bar, and unexpected guests had arrived. Guests who were friends of Sorial Effendi, and who were drinking coffee instead of taking a siesta. He began to play 'As Time Goes By' from the film *Casablanca*. It went well with the

surroundings, but not with the story of the mysterious tomb. Sorial was annoyed by the music, but as the black pianist was playing very softly, he kept his characteristic good manners and continued:

“According to ancient writers, years after the death of Alexander the Great, his mother, Olympias, claimed that he had been poisoned. But that interpretation was never substantiated and may have just been an invention of her scheming mind to destroy a few enemies.

“It seems that, sensing his approaching death, the Great Macedonian had expressed the wish to be buried at the Oasis of Siwa, alongside his heavenly ‘father’, the god Ammon-Zeus. Let us remember that a few years earlier, at the oracle of this remote oasis in the western desert, Alexander, after a perilous journey, had heard the priest call him ‘Son of Zeus’. I should also stress that the double horns that decorate Alexander’s head, as depicted on Ptolemaic coins, are a reference to his divine lineage as son of the horned god Ammon.

Traver, apologising to Sorial for the interruption, added that with the rise of Christianity, all those animal-inspired deities became standards for the depiction of Satan, the Devil, Beelzebub, whilst, in the passages of the Old Testament, Lucifer had been the brightest, most beautiful of the angels, and bore no resemblance to the freakishly ugly, terrifying, cruel little creatures that spread fear into the hearts of the faithful who dare to look upon them in the icons and murals of churches.

“Quite right,” said Sorial, taking a sip of his coffee. “Let me add,” he went on, “That the nickname branding a man a ‘cuckold’ – one wearing horns – was a mediaeval invention. In ancient times, horns in any form decorating the head of a man had nothing to do with the misconduct of his wife – they simply symbolised strength.” Everyone laughed at this jape.

Sorial told us about the oldest surviving reference to the death and burial of Alexander the Great. “It is accredited to an unknown, probably Greek, writer, who must have lived in Alexandria. His fictitious ‘*Tale of Alexander*’ was a famous myth in the Middle Ages and the years that followed. It was known to the Greeks as the ‘*Fyllada*’ or ‘*Rymada*’ of *Alexander the Great*’ by Pseudo-Callisthenes. Dozens of variations and translations were read around the then known world, spreading the epic of the Macedonian sovereign from Ireland to Mongolia, and from the Scandinavian countries of the north to the plateaux of Ethiopia, passing through all of Europe, of course.

“Pseudo-Callisthenes tells us that the body of Alexander, after some delay, was transported from Babylon to Memphis in Egypt, in a lavish catafalque to be buried at Siwa. He stresses, however, that the burial actually took place in Alexandria, by order of Ptolemy.

“Many Greek and Roman writers refer to the fact that Ptolemy, son of Lagos, to whom Egypt was entrusted following the breaking up of Alexander’s Empire, seized the relics of the Great King from Perdikkas, who planned to take them to Aeges in Macedonia. After a brief delay

in Memphis, the final burial took place in Alexandria, the city Alexander had founded, which carried his name, and which was preparing itself to become the greatest city in the world.

"Strabo, Diodoros Siculus, Plutarch and Zenobius are writers of the pre-Christian era who refer to the burial of the embalmed body of Alexander the Great in Alexandria. But even during the early centuries of the Christian calendar, well-known writers such as Flavius Josephus, Pausanias, Curtius Rufus, Dion Cassius, the poet Lucanus, Suetonius, Antiochus Grypus, Achilles Tatius, Herodian, up until John of Antioch at the beginning of the 6th century AD, speak of a glorious mausoleum in Alexandria where the body of Alexander was kept."

We were all impressed by Sorial's memory, and Cécile admiringly exclaimed: "But Monsieur Sorial, how on earth do you remember all that!" Sorial did not limit himself solely to referring to his sources, when each of the writers had lived, but often told of characteristic details of the narration, such as how Caesar and Octavian, after visiting the mausoleum, refused to visit the tombs of the Ptolemies, claiming that that honour was due only to the Great King and not 'to the dead'.

"You see," Sorial went on with emphasis, "We must consider it certain that, until the early 3rd century AD, that impressive tomb was visible in Alexandria and could be visited, at least by select dignitaries.

"The fact that ancient writers refer to the mummification of Alexander's body should not seem strange to us. For,

although the Macedonians generally cremated their dead nobility, Alexander was hailed as a Pharaoh, legal successor of the ancient Kings of the Valley of the Nile, and therefore he was entitled to be embalmed. So it was only natural that he should be buried by the traditions of the Pharaohs, in a golden sarcophagus placed within a glorious monument. The mausoleum was called the 'Soma' or 'Sema', as was the surrounding area of the city centre where it was located.

"That golden sarcophagus is one of the reasons for the spreading of the myth of hidden treasure. But as Strabo tells us in the 1st century BC, one of the last Ptolemies, nicknamed Kokkis, also known as Parisactos, misappropriated the gold sarcophagus and replaced it with a glass one.

"We also have reports that other Roman emperors, such as Caligula, Caracalla, Septimus Severus and Trajan, paid their respect to the dead Alexander. In fact it was written that, when Caracalla entered the tomb, 'he removed his cloak and placed it upon the tomb together with his ring, his belt and other valuable objects'. In this way the brutal Roman – it is said that he destroyed large portions of the city of Alexandria because the Alexandrians mocked him – sought to honour the great leader.

"All that I have told you, together with other records, bear witness to the existence of the mausoleum in Alexandria, and cannot be ignored. I consider tales of the existence of the tomb in Samarkand, in Java, Vergina or Siwa, to be scientifically unacceptable, not to say infantile."

At that moment the pianist started to play *Plaisirs d'amour*, which interrupted Sorial's attention for a while. Unconsciously, he softly sang a few lines under his breath, only to be nudged out of his reverie by Miléna. Throwing an angry glance towards the unsuspecting pianist, Sorial continued:

"With the spread of Christianity, the destruction of the idols and the victimisation by the Christians of those who remained faithful to the ancient polytheistic religion, a new age began for Alexandria. It is reasonable for us to believe that together with the *Serapeum*, other ancient places of worship were destroyed, including the tomb of Alexander. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, wishing to stress the futility of this world, writes in his comments of one of Paul's epistle to the Corinthians: 'Who can tell me where the tomb of Alexander is to be found?'"

Sorial surprised us by quoting the words of the Holy Father in Greek: "Πού γάρ, εἶπέ μοί, τῆς σίμας Ἀλεξάνδρου, εἶδον μοί?" and then translating them into French.

He continued, "Chrysostom was speaking of something that, even in his time, had already been destroyed, to the point that it was unrecognisable."

He paused for breath and a few sips of coffee.

"These are the facts that we have about the Soma from the writings of historians and travellers, from ancient times until the later Roman times. The discovery of the tomb is the secret dream of every archaeologist who scours the bowels of the Ptolemaic earth."

I chose this point to ask Sorial's opinion on the recent claims of a Greek archaeologist who insisted that she had discovered the tomb of Alexander at the Oasis of Siwa. Sorial scoffed at the very suggestion.

"Well, I must say, her claims and her insistence confused me for a while. You see, she was referring to specific inscriptions. And inscriptions are irrefutable evidence. But fortunately, a team of scientists arrived from Greece last year. When I heard the brief statement by the expert epigraphist, I realised that what is written in that Roman inscription is one thing, and it is quite another that the fanciful lady was telling us."

He made a gesture as if to say – forget it, we've wasted enough time on these fairy tales.

"And what happened afterwards with the complete domination of Christianity?" asked Miléna, who was following what Sorial said with interest.

Sorial finished off his coffee, which had gone cold, and with a gesture of disappointment said:

"Afterwards, nothing. Absolutely nothing. There is no mention of the tomb for more than five whole centuries. After the Arab conquest of Alexandria in 641 AD, the city went into decline. In the middle of the 10th century an Arab traveller, Maasoudi, in his book '*The Golden Grasslands*', brings the tomb back from oblivion. He mentions it only briefly and vaguely: he says that the faithful of Allah came from distant places to the centre of *Iskandareya* – that's Alexandria in Arabic – to worship at a chapel, the tomb of Nabi Iskandar, the great prophet of Allah. Iskandar is

Alexander, who had been appropriated by the Arabs, as he had been by other peoples.

“There then follow another five centuries of silence before we hear two other Arab travellers, Leon the African and Marmol, in the mid 15th century, speak once again of the tomb of Iskandar, which is to be found in a small structure in the centre of Alexandria, and is worshipped by local Muslims.

“At that time, Alexandria was in steady decline. The nadir of the Great City had arrived, and Alexandria, city of wisdom, knowledge, art and culture; Alexandria, home to a million souls during the Graeco-Roman period, decayed, languished; her citizens left and she became a city of ruins, where just 6,000 miserable inhabitants lived outside the city walls in a new district formed by the alluvia of the Nile, where once stood the Heptastadion. It was in this wretched state that Bonaparte – who had not yet become the Great Napoleon – found Alexandria at the end of the 18th century, when he landed his forces there.

“And it was then that the magnificent tomb, lost since the 3rd century, took on another dimension, and entered the realm of myth, of fantasy.

“Few travellers in the years of decline bothered to look for the tomb. But those who did show an interest were directed by ignorant guides to various ruins that had nothing to do with the monument they were actually seeking.

“When French savants arrived, accompanying the forces of the Corsican conqueror, the locals told them that the tomb of Alexander was a granite sarcophagus with

a missing lid, discovered, who knows when or how, in the yard of the Attarine mosque, formerly the grand church of Saint Athanasios. Water ran into the sarcophagus from a fountain, and the faithful of Allah washed their feet, hands and faces in it, as dictated by the Holy Koran, before entering the mosque to pray."

"Yes, yes," said Sorial, in answer to Cécile's question, "That mosque was located in the same place as the modern-day Attarine mosque. The current building dates from the 19th century. Of the old building there remain only a few columns and an inscription over the entrance, which, if I remember rightly, dates back to the 15th century.

"Certain that this was in fact the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, but unable to decipher the complicated hieroglyphics that covered it, the French scientists prepared to transport it to the Louvre. They had it all packed up in a warehouse on the docks ready to be shipped, when the English unexpectedly destroyed the French fleet anchored at Abukir, near to Alexandria. And so the defeated French were obliged to hand over the sarcophagus as spoils of war.

"Overjoyed that they had not only foiled the plans of the French to conquer Egypt, but had also managed to relieve them of the magnificent sarcophagus of the legendary Alexander, the English promptly loaded the priceless booty aboard a ship setting sail for England. And so the British Museum became the proud owner of the so called "Sarcophagus of Alexander". A few years later, however, when Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphics and

the inscriptions were read, it was revealed, to the great disappointment of all concerned, that this was, in fact, the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II, the last Pharaoh before the Persian invasion, and not that of Alexander.

“The story of the sarcophagus is complicated even more by the fact that, according to history, Nectanebo II died outside Alexandria – perhaps in Ethiopia – after the Persian invasion. However, he is referred to in the Romance of Alexander, by Pseudo-Callisthenes, as the natural father of the Macedonian King. The fanciful, unknown author tells how, after the loss of his throne, Nectanebo II – who was a sage and magician – secretly left Egypt for Macedonia. He was received in the court of Philip by Olympias, whom he charmed with his magical powers. Having convinced the Queen that he was the personification of Ammon, he seduced her, and so Alexander was born, son of the last Pharaoh of Egypt. When the child grew up he laid claim to and conquered the throne of his father, and himself became Pharaoh.

“This ingenious tale was told by troubadours in the noble courts of Europe throughout the Middle Ages. Other wandering storytellers carried the myth around the Orient, from bazaar to bazaar. When darkness fell, people would listen open-mouthed to the story in the caravanserai, just as they did on cold Balkan nights around a reassuring fire. It was patiently copied out onto papyrus and parchment – all around the world, wherever reading and writing were known – by Byzantine, Ethiopian, Persian and Mongolian scribes, and each time it was copied out the scribe would

add something that he believed would make the story more enticing, more original."

"That's all very well," said Miléna curiously, taking advantage of the fact that Sorial had paused for breath. "But how do you explain the presence of a Pharaonic monument in Alexandria, nothing more than a fishing village called Rhakotis in the time of Nectanebo II."

"Well, I don't have an explanation for that," Sorial replied, "And none of the various interpretations put forward by archaeologists and historians is convincing. But what we do know is that the Ptolemies brought numerous Pharaonic artefacts to their capital, Alexandria, from Heliopolis, Memphis and Upper Egypt – from granite lions to whole obelisks."

At this point Sorial stood up to welcome the young Egyptian archaeologist who had just come into Monty's Bar. He greeted us with a broad smile.

"Sit down a while," said Sorial, "Have something to drink before we leave for the mosque.

"While our friend is having his coffee, I'll continue the story of the legend of the tomb. A few years after the seizing of the so-called Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, the supposed location of the mysterious tomb moves some 500 metres to the east, almost in a straight line down the ancient Canopic Way."

As Sorial did not have a map of the city handy, he picked up a paper napkin and quickly made a sketch of ancient Alexandria. In the shape of a Macedonian chlamys, as Dinocrates had planned it, laid out between Lake Mareotis

and the sea, the streets crossing each other at right angles in the hippodamean manner.

"Here is the Pharos island, and the Heptastadion that joined it to the mainland. It forms two harbours, the Eunostos in the west, and the Megas Limin in the east."

Two parallel pencil lines cut across the 'map' of the city from east to west.

"This is the Canopic Way." Another two parallel lines on the flimsy napkin began at the Megas Limin, running from north to south, reaching almost to the lake. "This is the Street of the Soma. According to ancient sources, the mausoleum of Alexander, which was called the *Soma* or *Sema*, was located at the junction of these two roads. It is here, at the foot of Kom el Dikka – which recent excavations by Polish archaeologists have levelled – that we find the Mosque of the Prophet Daniel.

"As far back as 1731, the Frenchman, Bonamy, in a primitive and clumsy map, attempted to establish that the current Nabi Danial Street was in fact the ancient Soma Street. It is a known fact, though, that Fouad Street, which follows the ancient Canopic Way, but also Nabi Danial Street – which with some reservations we can identify with the Soma Street – are the only roads in Alexandria that have remained in the same position from ancient times to the present day. Even when, over the past centuries, Alexandria was no more than a pile of ruins, these two streets, crossing at right angles, still existed as part of the ancient hippodamean grid."

Sorial drew an X with his pencil on the rough map to show where Bonamy had marked the location of the royal tomb – exactly on the site of the Nabi Danial mosque.

“The fantastic tale of a Greek named Ambroise Skilitsis, played a part in the propagation of this new myth. We don't know much about Skilitsis, but he must have belonged to the family of the same name that later became important in Alexandria. In 1841, he held the post of interpreter at the Russian Consulate in Alexandria. A learned Alexandrian, Max de Zogheb, in his research into the tomb of Alexander the Great, relates the story Skilitsis told: ‘Skilitsis had been assigned to take an important group of foreign visitors around Alexandria. He showed them the antiquities and important sights of the city, and then took them down into the vaults of the Nabi Danial Mosque.’

“Quite why he thought those vaults worthy of a visit, we aren't told, but: ‘While they were there, they saw that damp underground passageways ran from the centre of the crypt, from the tomb of the Prophet Danial. The group, with Skilitsis at their head, began to investigate one of the passages, and with surprise, through the worm-eaten cracks in a wooden door, saw an embalmed body lying in a glass sarcophagus in the centre of a room, with papyri scattered all around on the floor. The head of the mommy bore a golden crown and the design of the room itself was lavish. They could stay no longer because the caretaker of the mosque pulled them back, and the tour of the mysterious crypt was interrupted.’ The next day, when Skilitsis tried to return to the vault, he learned that his entry had been

forbidden. In fact, workmen had been brought in to close up the passageway so that no one could visit the strange subterranean chamber.

"We must assume that Skilitis, an educated man, had read the descriptions of the tomb of Alexander written by Dion Cassius, and other ancient writers, and that, enchanted by their descriptions of treasure, sought to impress his peers with this fantastic tale. Yet his narrative lacks scientific accuracy; the very claim of 'scattered papyri' is enough to refute him. It would be impossible for papyri to survive two thousand years in such a damp environment.

"Despite the fact that with this fairy-tale, Skilitis places himself at the very head of the group of mythmakers who, with their farfetched stories have preserved the legend of a hidden tomb for a century and a half, you have to admit that the fact that two passageways of the crypt were sealed off was most unusual. The building work was substantiated a few years later by another visitor following the footsteps of the Greek interpreter through the bowels of the Alexandrian earth under the Mosque of the Prophet Daniel. This was Mohmoud Bey el Falaki, who, despite the protection of the Khedive, also found the passage closed off, and every attempt at further investigation of the vault forbidden."

At this point, Sorial paused. After a moment, and with a serious expression, as if leaving some mystery to hover in the air, he added:

"Well, Skilitis was a mythologer, but El Falaki was no charlatan. He was an eminent scientist, a city-planner, and

astronomer to the Khedive. On the order of his employer, the Khedive, that is, he drew up a map of ancient Alexandria as it must have been during the Graeco-Roman years. This was a difficult task for a man who was not himself an archaeologist, who had limited means and little time – the Khedive was in a hurry.

“El Falaki had to carefully study all the ancient ruins visible in the middle of the 19th century, but he also opened hundreds of trenches to examine the underground remains of buildings and roads.

“You might well ask what Ismail Pasha wanted the map for. It wasn't for his own purposes; Napoleon III, who was writing the history of Caesar, had requested the map of the ancient city to illustrate the pages of his book, which related the battles fought in Alexandria during the roman civil war. The “Little Napoleon”, as Victor Hugo called him, never finished his book, but archaeologists owe El Falaki a debt of gratitude for his work, which is useful even today.

“We'll come back to El Falaki later. Come on,” said Sorial, standing up, “We'll walk there. It's only a few minutes away.”

Indeed, it was not far from the Cecil to the mosque, and we were soon entering the narrow yard – or rather, the wide passageway – that connects the end of the street of the Prophet Daniel with his mosque.

The modern-day building is not very old. It was built at the end of the 18th or early 19th century in the place of the older 15th or 16th century mosque, which itself stood on the foundations of one of the first Muslim shrines, built

after the conquest of Alexandria by Amr ebn el Ass in 641. That first mosque was called the Dzoul Karnein Mosque, that is, the Mosque of the Lord with Two Horns. Here, once again, history and legend part company, as it is said that the double-horned sire – Dzoul Karnein, referred to in verse 18 ('sura') of the Koran – was no other than Alexander the Great, although many historians disagree with this interpretation.

As we entered the yard, a beggar benefited a handout from Cécile and wished that Allah might grant us long life. We took off our shoes and placed them in a neat line in a corner near the door, alongside the shoes of the few faithful in the mosque at the time. Our companion, Hosni, explained in a hushed voice that, over the past fifty years, the mosque and adjoining building had suffered a great deal of damage and bore no resemblance to the depictions on picture postcards dating back to the beginning of the century.

"Even the grand minaret that you see on old etchings has gone," Sorial added sadly.

Hosni also explained that some of the tombs of the Royal Family of Mohamed Ali had lain beside the mosque for many years. By tradition, the area was a burial ground, and that was why Kom el Dikka, the hill at the foot of which the mosque stood, had once been known as Kom el Demas – or Hill of Corpses. And indeed the digging of the archaeologists had confirmed this name.

Barefoot, we entered the mosque. It was cool, clean and quiet, but of no particular architectural interest. An elderly,

gallabeya-clad man, who had exchanged a few words with Sorial and Hosni, went ahead of us. He welcomed us warmly.

“Ed-fadal, ed-fadal,” he repeated, gesturing for us to enter. He welcomed Cécile politely. Who knows what he was thinking to himself on seeing this blonde Egyptian princess, dressed in the European fashion.

Silently, walking on tiptoe, as if feeling guilty that we were entering this place of worship out of nothing more than curiosity, we followed our host. I wondered what the old man's position was in the mosque. Was he the caretaker? The equivalent of our verger? Was he the muezzin, who at the regular calls to prayer screamed from the top of the minaret? Or he might have been a sheikh. Or an imam – he was certainly old enough, with a short white beard, and a white turban wrapped around a black skullcap. He was clean, lean and moved gracefully, courteously. Sorial had explained that in the Muslim clergy there are few dress distinctions. Not even the highest ranking wear particular robes of office.

We crossed the rear part of the mosque diagonally and came to a half-open, heavy wooden door, which moaned unwillingly as we pushed it open. Passing through the door, we found ourselves in a large, recently painted space. The floor was covered with numerous old, tattered rugs, and low columns with early-Christian capitals had been decoratively placed to support the dome.

“They're crazy about whitewashing everything in this part of the world,” whispered Traver, noticing that the

painters as usual, had daubed everything – walls, alcoves, marble columns, wooden window-sills, keyholes, railings – nothing escaped their voracious paintbrushes. Everything is generously whitewashed, so that the interiors of Muslim monuments are often an agglomeration of countless layers of paint.

I smiled at Bill's comment, and suggested jokingly that one could make a science of it – something along the lines of calculating the age of trees, dendrochronology – it would be called 'paint-layer-dating', or chromostratigraphy, whereby an analysis of the number of layers of paint would be used to determine the age of a building.

But enough of paint and plaster...

In the centre of the room there was an octagonal opening in the floor, a large hollow with a high wooden protective banister around it. Over this a huge, inappropriately modern, crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, illuminating the entrance to the subterranean crypt. Its light took away much of the mystery of the place, I thought.

We stood around the opening leaning on the banister, and bending over we could see below a large catafalque covered with dark-green cloth.

"That's the tomb of the Prophet Daniel," Sorial whispered, "Although it's probably empty – a cenotaph – as according to the Bible Daniel died in Babylon some three centuries before Alexandria was even built."

A long wooden ladder leaned against one side of the wall. One by one, we began to climb down carefully, one rung at a time, until we found ourselves standing on the floor

of the crypt. But when Cécile's turn came, she hesitated, she eyed the drop separating her from the others who had already gone down into the crypt; she tried the ladder, shook it, and finding that it did not seem too steady, said decisively:

"No, no, I shan't come down. You go ahead."

Miléna said that she would stay with her aunt, while Hosni, seeing that Sorial knew his way around, offered to remain with the ladies.

When Hosni nimbly climbed back up the ladder, Sorial commented that he must dislike the claustrophobic, underground spaces, to which Traver retorted that he probably just preferred female company to theirs.

I agreed that the crypt was no place for the ladies, and turned my attention to Sorial's conducted tour. Semidarkness, dankness. We stood before the cenotaph of the Prophet Daniel while our Coptic friend, untiringly talkative, explained that the prayer corner, which in all Muslim places of worship faces Mecca, faced a slightly different direction here.

"Strange, isn't it?" he commented.

Opposite the tomb of Daniel and a little to the side, there was another smaller tomb – or perhaps we should call it an oversized coffin, in the shape of a large box – also covered with green cloth.

"That's the burial of Si Lokman el Hakim, as legend would have it, Daniel's wise companion. Daniel himself is a strange character; his story, as it was related in the 10th century by two Arab sages, bears more resemblance to

that of Alexander the conqueror, than to that of the Hebrew prophet who was thrown into the lion's den.

And as Sorial referred to the den of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon – Nabucco in Verdi's opera – I reflected that we too were in a den, but we were not being watched from above by the cruel eye of a Chaldean tyrant, but by our benevolent host, who rewarded Sorial's friendly nod with a smile as we took the vaulted, upward passage leading in the direction of Nabi Danial Street.

I felt as if we were entering the close-knit circle of those few who are privy to the mystery of the horn-bearing Alexander whose presence followed us around the city. Alexander the Macedonian, the Great King of Persepolis and Babylon, the Pharaoh with the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, son of Ammon-Zeus, the first to have been called Great, the one who bridged Greece with the East, the Saint of the Byzantines, the knight-companion of Roland at the battle of Roncesvalles in 778, the hero who rose into the heavens in a chariot drawn by winged griffins, who visited the depths of the seas, Dzoul Karnein, Nabi Iskandar of the Arabs... could such a man, even in death, be held within these sunless vaults?

Just like Skilitis and El Falaki, we found ourselves, a few paces further on, face to face with the blocked-off passage that for a century and a half had forbidden access to the curious. And in the depths of that dark passage, a thought occurred to me that I dared not express: It's better this way, I mused. Let the Tomb of Alexander the Great never be found, so that the mermaid of the Greek folktale may

continue to ask: Does King Alexander live? And always receive the right answer: He is alive and rules the earth.

THE LOST D WARRIORS' IV THE LOST WARRIORS' DAY AY

That May morning, there were few visitors to the military burial grounds at El Alamein. The German War Memorial, evoking the setting from a Wagnerian opera with its austere stone and granite blocks, stood like a Templars' castle, out of character with the calm, the serenity of the desert. A handful of Germans walked around in silence. A aged, grey-haired man with a limp leant on his heavy walking stick, intently searching the endless list of names chiselled in the red stone – the names of the fallen soldiers. The visitors stepped with care; gliding lightly by as if peace had nestled in this place, as if the dead rivals of the past were finally resting, they had found peace and demanded absolute silence. They were comfortable in this wasted patch of African soil, looking out over the immensity of the sea. The sun held pride of place here, playing happily with the shadows in its timeless circle.

The friends from the Cecil entered a tiny room near to the entrance of the Memorial. It was like a small chapel. The walls were decorated with numerous gaudy paper wreaths, dusty notes pinned to them written in German. Were they prayers? Were they messages? Cécile, who spoke German, was about to read one of them out to us, but then, as if thinking better of it, she murmured:

“No, nothing. It’s not important.”

After a while we got back into the car and headed off for the Italian Memorial. It too rises on the northern side of the road facing the sea. It is an impressive monument, well suited to the Italian dead. Made of white marble, its form influenced by North African architecture, it blends well with the surrounding landscape. An Italian flag fluttered nervously atop a tall flagpole. Above the entrance was an inscription in large letters: ‘AI CADUTI ITALIANI’ – to the fallen Italians. The enormous, domed hall was empty, imposing like a cathedral, and predominated by five high windows looking out towards the sea. The slightest whisper, even a sigh, echoed eerily around.

There are thousands of headstones built in to the wall of this vast ossuary that holds the dead of the great battle. In order to read the names, you have to either stoop down – or even kneel when the headstones near the floor – or lift your gaze up high to read the names of those whose fate it was to look down on the world from above.

Leaning towards Miléna, Cécile whispered:

“You can feel the souls of the dead soldiers all around you, touching you...”

The echo picked up her last words: "...*touching you... touching you... touching you...*" and swirled them up high into the dome, repeating them as if the souls agreed and each of them wanted to be touched. After a while we left.

It only remained for us to visit the allied cemetery. It is situated closer to the village, on the other side of the road, looking peacefully out over the vast desert. Here there are ordinary graves without any monumental buildings, just a low arcade at the entrance offering the visitor some shade. Everything here is of human proportions.

"The victors had time to bury their dead, that's why there are graves here. The others, the defeated, were left unburied for many years," Sorial told us in a hushed voice, and went on: "After the war, delegations from the defeated nations, Germany and Italy, came to gather the remains of their dead. They were scattered all over the desert, from the Qattara Depression to the sea."

"It must have been a difficult job," said Traver, "With minefields everywhere. I'm sure there must still be mines buried under the sand in the depths of the desert."

"What a gruesome task," said Cécile. She grimaced and turned her face away as if she wanted to avoid the terrible sight.

Ripped, rotting uniforms; bones bleached by the wind, sand and sun. Empty boots in which desert scorpions had made their nests. And if you searched carefully with your fingers in the sand, you would find brass buttons, the metal identity tag hanging on a chain and the tiny cross of hope.

At other times, you would find medals pinned to the khaki rags – meagre compensation for premature death. There were photographs showing such sad memorabilia at the museum nearby.

“Note,” said Sorial, “That both sides have separate burial places for the Muslims.”

The Italian troops had Libyan soldiers with them, a battalion of *Askari*, just as the Allies had locals fighting alongside them in their red *tarboush*.

“At the Allied cemetery,” Cécile commented, “There are many graves bearing the Star of David instead of a cross. I didn’t notice,” she added, “Whether the Italian ossuary held any Jewish headstones, probably not... And, of course, there’s no point in looking for any Jewish names amongst the German dead...”

She said this lightly, in an attempt to dispel the heavy atmosphere that had fallen upon us.

Realising from the faces of the others how unsuitable her flippant remarks had been, she said no more...

An inquisitive bird stood perched on a nearby tomb and, ignorant of human suffering, began to peck at some seeds carried by the playful breeze.

Sorial suggested that we see the Battle Museum, but we were all tired, and the long amble through the graves lay heavily upon us.

Traver, who had been to El Alamein before and had visited the museum, began to describe the exhibits, stressing that we would not be missing much if we did not go.

"Come on, let's go for a swim. Let's go to the sea. That's what we agreed on before, isn't it?" said Bill. "Let's give the museum a miss and I'll describe the battle to you all later."

"Yes, let's go to the beach," we agreed. We were beginning to feel the heat as midday approached. The sparse clouds, which brought a light breeze, could no longer hold the burning sun at bay.

The old minibus that Sorial had hired set off unenthusiastically for the coast. Magdi, the thin, dark-skin driver, drove as close to the sea as the sand covering the dirt track would allow.

Well-prepared as usual, Sorial had brought with him two parasols that he kept stored in his cabin on the beach in Stanley. The ladies found shelter under one of them, laid out their colourful beach towels and sat down. The men took cover behind the bus to change, then went back to the parasols in their swimsuits, self-consciously white-skinned with flabby and bulging tummies.

Cécile was wearing her swimsuit under her clothes, but did not dare to undress in front of the others. She hesitated. She knew that, despite her age, she was still beautiful and that her body – thanks to continuous and persistent attention – had stood up well to the onslaught of time. But she also knew that the years were beginning to leave their mark; she was no longer the stunning beauty who drew the gaze of every man on the Côte d'Azur.

"Let's go for a swim," said Sorial, hanging his towel on the 'men's' parasol, and he skipped off down to the water, as the burning sand scorched the soles of his feet.

"Yes, let's go," said Traver, "We'll leave the ladies to change."

Cécile smiled at Miléna and asked her:

"Are you wearing your swimsuit? Aren't you going in for a dip?"

Miléna knew that Cécile was envious of her. But it was without ill will; she envied her despite herself, even though she loved her. She was jealous of her youth; she was jealous because she thought Miléna drew more male attention than she did. She had become even more jealous of her over the months since she had been widowed. Miléna knew that despite the encouraging tone of her aunt's invitation to go for a swim, the question was in fact exploratory: She wanted to know whether Miléna intended to make an appearance in a swimsuit.

"No, Cécile," Miléna replied, "The water is still cold, and, anyway, I'm not wearing my swimsuit. I might put it on later. Why don't you go into the sea and cool down?"

"Later perhaps," said Cécile, relieved, "I might go in later. For now, I'll just sunbathe."

She took off her skirt and blouse, lay her towel out in the sun, turned towards the sea, adjusted her straw hat, put on her sunglasses and let out a deep sigh of satisfaction. Everything was perfect.

The colour of the sea from Agamy to El Alamein, Marsah Matrouh, Soloum and as far as the Libyan border, is quite unique. It begins as a light green near to the shore, where the frothing waves break endlessly. Further out, as the water deepens, it takes on a shade of aquamarine and further

out still, the green tones disappear and the blue becomes ever deeper. The sky above the sea is sapphire-blue. When you first behold this seascape leading off into infinity, you hardly dare believe your eyes.

Cécile took her sunglasses off for a while – to ensure an even tan – and avidly took in the greens, the blues. The sun warmed her strangely; the breeze stroked her body with repeated caresses, erotically, following the rise and fall of the waves. The seductive voice of the sea whispered rhythmically. Yes, sighed one wave, No, sighed the next. Yes, No... Yes, No, Yes, Yes, Yes!

She closed her eyes and gave herself up to her sensations, becoming one with the sea. Deep within her something fluttered. Long ago, many years before, when she still dreamt beautiful dreams, she often felt so wonderful when she awoke that she would shut her eyes tightly in an attempt to go back to sleep and return to her dreams. And now, she kept her eyes closed to hold on to that fluttering sensation for just a while longer, that feeling that came with the blues and the greens like a belated promise.

How long did the feeling last? It may only have been for a minute, and yet the ticking of the clock was irrelevant, as some moments last forever.

Afterwards, as if awaking from a dream, she whispered: "My God, how could men have fought a war in this Paradise!"

They were silent for some time. The men were splashing around like children in the surf that drowned out their voices. Only the sounds of the sea could be heard as it chattered

away; as the waves came and went incessantly, hurling the bathers out onto the sand and then dragging them back in like flotsam.

Through half-closed eyes, Miléna watched the sea as it played with the bodies struggling in the waves, like a cat playing with mice. A huge turquoise cat that would for a moment allow the mice to escape towards the shore and then would grab them again with her frothy claws and pull them back into her embrace. "I hope they won't drown," she laughed.

"Surely not, can't you see that Bill and Sorial are strong swimmers? Our 'author' is not so capable, but he's staying near the shore and only playing with the surf. Don't worry," she quipped, "They're not going to drown."

"I've never seen such a beautiful sea," Cécile went on, "Such colour, such beauty, such calm. We're all alone, there's not a soul for miles and miles around; we have the beach all to ourselves as far as the eye can see. How different this is from the Riviera, where the crowds are packed together like sardines, where everything is organised, arranged, stylish and comfortable."

Cécile moved her towel carefully and lay down in a different position. She placed her head under the shade of the parasol and gave her body up to the caresses of the sun. Her niece opened a book. She began to read. With the turning of each page, she cast a glance towards the sea, which seemed to be hurling in the waves more and more ferociously, as if ordering them to break further and

further inshore. As if the sea were trying to reach her, to soak her, to touch her, to take her away.

At one point, and after much effort, a stronger wave managed to splash Cécile's feet. She shivered. She watched as the wave retreated, as the sand sucked up the water that had been left behind, erasing the damp tracks of its passage.

Miléna was re-reading some pages from the *Alexandria Quartet* by Durrell. Just flipping through random passages. She perused the pages of 'Justine', 'Clea', 'Balthazar', 'Mountolive' in an attempt to find the Alexandria that Durrell had experienced half a century before. Now she was reading a paragraph where the English novelist described a similar sea, a similar desert. The previous evening we had discussed the *Alexandria Quartet* at some length. I had told her that, despite the author's assurance that the city he describes is real, Durrell's Alexandria is non-existent, imaginary. I had added: "No matter how hard you search, you will find no such Alexandria. There was no such city in Durrell's time, not before, nor after. It is a city the author himself created, a fictitious city, just as the characters in the book are fictitious."

She was not convinced, but my words had disappointed her.

The shade thrown by the parasols played an endless game of hide and seek as the sun continued to rise,

"Let's get out," said Sorial, whose bald head felt the onslaught of the sun more than the others did. "We don't

want to be getting sunstroke... and let's not leave the ladies too long alone."

And so we returned to the welcome shade of the parasols and lay down. Sorial had brought a portable icebox stocked with cool fizzy drinks, fruit and a sandwich for each of us, carefully wrapped in foil. We quenched our thirst and praised once again the organisational skills of our Coptic friend, who left nothing to chance.

How quickly one gets to know people when travelling abroad, I thought. These relationships may not be deep-rooted and may not survive long, but how much more easily one opens up, how many friendships are formed – even if fleeting.

With the exception of Miléna, who was in Alexandria for the first time and whose acquaintance with the city was based solely upon the books she had read, we all had a very special relationship with the city.

Sorial was a born and bred Alexandrian. As the years went by, he loved the city more and more and could be separated from it less and less. Cécile had been born in Alexandria, and even though she had left for France when very young, she continued, even from a distance, to have strong ties with Egypt, as her husband was an Egyptian. Although the changes there upset her, she did not complain, at least, she did not express her disappointment. Traver was not an Alexandrian, nor did he claim that privilege, but he had lived for a while in the city during the war. He had found himself in Alexandria at a time when things were in chaos, a time that marked the end of an era. He was the only one

amongst us who had met Durrell, not in Alexandria, but in the South of France, near Avignon where the author had withdrawn for the last years of his life. And I myself feel that I belong to Alexandria, not simply because I was born and grew up here, but because I never ceased to feel that it is my city.

These were my thoughts as I watched my friends of the past three days. Bill, invigorated by the cool of the sea, was in particularly high spirits. His wet, uncombed, thin grey hair parted left and right in two untamed shocks, and his little beard which had become pointed in the water, gave him the appearance of an ageing faun. Despite his 70 years – or maybe more – you could still see that his once muscular body was not totally unexercised. He was talking with Sorial who knew the area well and who was explaining that somewhere further out to sea, beyond the sandy seabed, there was a shallow reef covered in sea urchins. Good sea urchins, the sort you can eat. I noticed that Sorial, despite the constant activity that prevented him from gaining weight, looked much older without his clothes on. His body showed the flabbiness of one who has never taken exercise. Cécile, unlike many women who look much better when dressed, lost nothing of her attractiveness without her clothes. In fact, I must admit that her swimsuit flattered her, which is rare for a sixty-year-old. Miléna had still not put on her swimsuit, despite the urging of the others who, finding the water so delightful, tried to convince both aunt and niece to take a dip.

"I shall go for a swim, but later," Miléna said coquettishly, "But for now, I'd like Bill to tell us about the Battle of El Alamein. I know that it was the battle that changed the course of the war in North Africa.

And as Traver settled himself more comfortably in the shade, she added with a smile: "You promised."

"Yes, of course," said Traver, after a brief pause to put things straight in his mind. How can you sum up such an historic event in a few words? How can you encapsulate the thousands of soldiers, cannons, tanks, planes, machine-guns... How can you sit back comfortably and narrate all this as you lounge under a colourful parasol, drinking cool lemonade with your fellow travellers?

"Indeed, the battle of El Alamein was one of the most decisive of the Second World War. For the British, it was their first victory since the outbreak of hostilities. For two years things had been going from bad to worse for the British and their allies. And what allies did they have? Since at the end of '40 and the beginning of '41 – before Hitler brought Russia into the war – Great Britain had only little Greece to fight alongside her against the Axis forces. After El Alamein, Britain suffered no other defeat.

"But let's sum up what was happening in the theatre of battle in Europe and North Africa at the end of that scorching summer of 1942. On the Eastern Front, Soviet forces were heroically holding off the attacks of the German divisions, preparing for the terrible counterattack of the winter. The Allies were ready to occupy Algeria, the Americans to land

in Morocco and attack Rommel from the rear. Almost all of Europe was suffering under German occupation.

“At the beginning of '42, General Erwin Rommel made a thunderous advance on North Africa, crossed the borders of Egypt and arrived in El Alamein. Who had heard of El Alamein before then?” asked Bill, looking to Sorial, who nodded in agreement, “No-one had heard of that small village, an insignificant dot on the map, 116 kilometres from Alexandria. Rommel's goal was to pass through Alexandria and take Suez, to close the canal to the Allies, cut off the shortest route to the Indies and occupy the rich oilfields on Arab soil. From there he would move on to the oilfields of Iraq and Iran, threatening the Soviet Union and the oil deposits of the Caspian Sea to the south.

“The rival forces came to a deadlock at El Alamein. A front, 65 kilometres wide, was created from the Qattara Depression to the sea. The Germans and Italians, looking to the east with the sun in their eyes for the greatest part of the day, were anxious to reach Alexandria, to rest for a while in that mythical city. They wanted to escape the sand that got everywhere; in your boots as you marched, in your clothes when the *khamsin* blew, in the engines of the armoured vehicles and cars at the slightest movement. Some 180,000 men – or should I say beardless lads in the majority – with 550 tanks and 340 aeroplanes persistently attempted to move towards the legendary city, Alexandria, that would bring them the final victory. The Allied forces, the British, Australians, New Zealanders, Indians, South Africans, Cypriots – just young boys themselves – made up

together with the Greeks, the 'Free' French', Sudanese and Egyptians the bulk of the 210,000 troops. They had 940 tanks and the support of 530 aeroplanes. The rival forces were separated by the 'Devil's Garden', an extensive minefield which protected Rommel. And both sides were 'planting' mines day and night.

"Then, in August of '42, Montgomery took command of the 8th Army. Things were not encouraging for the Allies following Rommel's assault at the Alam Halfa heights..." Traver turned to the west and pointed in that direction, "Everyone expected that the Germans would celebrate Christmas in Alexandria, Cairo and Suez.

The British civil authorities, as well as those of the occupied allied countries in exile based in Cairo, left Egypt. But Montgomery – stubborn, shrewd, methodical and well-organised – not only resisted all German-Italian assaults, but also succeeded in breaking the front and forcing Rommel to retreat.

"At ten minutes to ten, under the light of the moon on the evening of the 23rd of October, the so-called 'Second Battle of El Alamein' began. 1,200 Allied guns firing in waves made up the greatest firepower ever to be utilised on one single front. The cannons spewed out burning steel day and night, interminably spreading death and destruction.

"It should be stressed that Rommel's tanks had run out of fuel and his desperate pleas for supplies were foiled by the blockade of the Royal Navy. Had the two Italian ships loaded down with fuel not been sunk one after the other off Tubrouk, then the German tanks would not have

been immobilised, and the outcome of the whole battle might have been different. The *Prosperina* and the *Luciano* had been carrying 7,000 tons of petrol each. On the 24th of October, the Germans and Italians had 558 armoured vehicles in action. On the 4th of November, just 12 had enough fuel to move. Looking back, half a century later, I wouldn't hesitate to say that the battle of El Alamein could well have been called the 'battle for fuel'. And there is something else of great significance: Rommel fell ill at the end of October and was flown to Berlin where he was admitted to hospital. He was there when Montgomery's attack began on the 23rd of October. The German general who took his place, Von Stoume, suffered a heart attack just a few minutes after the assault began. He died the next day. On Hitler's insistence, Rommel rushed back to the front on the 27th of October. So for the first days of the Allied counter-attack – those crucial hours – the German troops were essentially without leadership.

“The battle lasted ten days. Hitler had ordered Rommel not to retreat. Montgomery had given the same orders to his commanders. In fact, during one of the early daily briefings to his officers, he recalled an inscription he had read at the straits of Thermopyles, in Greece, in 1933¹. It was the famed Epigram of Simonides. Inscribed on the tomb of Leonidas and his three hundred Spartans who had stood their ground, refusing to surrender, refusing to withdraw, it

¹ In fact, as the epigram has never been found, Montgomery could not have seen it when he visited the site of the famous battle of Thermopylae in 1933. He must have read about the inscription, as recorded by ancient authors, in history books.

read: "*Stranger, bear this message to the Spartans, that we lie here obedient to their laws* ²".

"On the 4th of November, the Axis troops began to retreat. Montgomery pushed them back without haste. Sidi Barani, Bengazi, Algeila. It was the beginning of the end of the war in North Africa. In January of '43, after advancing 2,500 kilometres, the Allies entered Tripoli victorious."

Traver spoke slowly, resonantly, as if giving a lesson to children. He continued:

"And the years passed. The victors magnanimously praised Rommel. They said he was a fair leader who, before the fateful end came, had defied Hitler's insane orders. Historians too found good words to say for the troops of the Afrika Korps: they said they were good fighters, well disciplined, that they carried out no atrocities... as they'd found no Jews roaming around the desert to burn. But it was hard to praise the Italians who had fought with less devotion, killed with less enthusiasm and generally did their best to stay alive. Many of the Axis defeats were put down to the Italians, which may or may not have been true. They said the Italians were made for song not war, and in those blazing years, singing was shameful..."

"They spoke also, of course, of the dead. The bodies were gathered up from the sand, methodically counted, recorded in endless lists and buried. The impressive cemeteries were built later and memorials erected so that they should not be forgotten.

² *The original text reads «Ω Ξείν, ἀγγελιον Λακεδαιμονίοις οτι τήδε κείμεθα τοις κείνων ρήμασι πειθόμενου» (Translation in Anthologia Palatina, VII, 249).*

"The battle of El Alamein alone cost the lives of 3,000 Germans and 4,000 Italians – the Allies lost as many again. But apart from the dead, there were the countless wounded, mutilated, those who lost their sight and those who lost the ability to smile for the remainder of their lives."

Bill recited the numbers calmly, in the cool tone of a narrator giving an account of a battle; first the terrible enemy casualties, then the numbers of our own 'fallen heroes'.

Some 50 years had passed since the battle – half a century – and we lay lazily in the self-same sand that had shuddered for months with the tremors of death, listening to an old soldier, marked by time, as he spoke of the terrible events of the past.

With some trepidation, I asked Traver whether he himself had fought at El Alamein. But no, he had not. A few months before the battle commenced, his plane had gone down – on one of the two occasions when his parachute had saved his life – and he had been hospitalised for a time in Alexandria. When Rommel arrived at El Alamein, Traver had been evacuated along with the other wounded to the east, to Palestine. It was in an Alexandrian hospital that he had met Sorial, whose father was a doctor.

"How terrible war is!" exclaimed Sorial.

"God, yes, it certainly is. I heard such awful tales from my parents," said Cécile. "As I told you, they were living in Alexandria at the time."

The princess avoided adding that she herself had also been in Alexandria back then, even though she must

have been very young. Feminine coquetry prevented her from supplying dates of reference which might accurately pinpoint her age. Effusively she added:

"If 'our boys' had not fought so bravely, if so many young men had not been killed, we would not be free today."

Bill nodded noncommittally, neither agreeing with nor disputing her claim, adding simply:

"I don't know what things would have been like today if the Allies had lost the war, but I'm not at all sure that if the dead warriors could speak they would agree to exchange the rest of their lives for a better world. Nor am I convinced that we are living in a better world... Wars have never benefited mankind."

Cécile's opinion was obviously diametrically opposed to Traver's and her face showed that she did not share his pessimism, but she avoided saying more. The beauty of the sea had transported her back to her childhood years, she felt so good, so carefree, invigorated, even though such terrible events had taken place here half a century ago.

Bill turned away from the wind to light up his pipe. All the while he had been talking, he had been cleaning it out and packing it with tobacco. His doctor had told him to give up cigarettes. A few months before, looking at x-rays of his chest, he had said: 'My dear friend, either you quit smoking immediately, or you won't see the year out.' Bill had shrugged as if not taking this threat seriously, but then it had occurred to him that there were still so many things that he wanted to do... not least of which was to see Alexandria again. He had given up cigarettes and compromised with

a pipe, because the process of filling and lighting it took up more time than actually smoking.

"Tell us, Bill," said Sorial, "When you think about the war years, what's the first thing that comes to mind? What is the most striking image? What is it that is indelibly marked in you memory?"

After several fruitless attempts to light up in the persistent wind, Bill drew deeply on his pipe, then a second time to ensure that the tobacco had caught.

"Whenever I recall the years of the War, all sorts of images enter my mind. They jostle around in my head; none of them takes priority. I see fleeting pictures that flash through my mind like shots from a machine-gun: the bombing of the major German cities, Hamburg, Dresden, Nuremberg. You could see nothing but rubble from up there in the sky – razed buildings, smoking ruins – and yet we kept on going back and forth, furiously dropping bombs and more bombs, tons and tons of bombs.

"We had been taken over by a sort of demented frenzy of destruction, like when you hear the coroner testify in the trial of a maniacal murderer: 'the second wound to the heart was fatal, but the perpetrator continued to stab the victim in the chest, in the face, all over the body... Over 50 stab wounds in all, not intended to actually kill, but because the killer had run amok and could not stop.' I remember, too, the anguish of trying to escape enemy crossfire, flak exploding all around you, the whole plane trembling and you wondering whether the rivets would hold the thing

together or if the body of the plane would peel apart like a sardine can.

“And I feel again the relief of returning from the night's sortie and, looking down, you see the runway lights of your own aerodrome. You say to yourself – Thank God, we pulled it off this time. And you cross yourself. You cross yourself as you get into the plane; you cross yourself when you return safe and sound. You kiss the cross that hangs around your neck, because you want to feel that, quite besides the fact that you are fighting for the right cause, you have God too on your side. You know that your mother is doing the same, you know that she prays night and day and lights candles to the Virgin and the saints. She trembles when, through her window, she sees a messenger on a bicycle, and her heart stops for fear that he may come to her door with bad news.

“I think about all these things. But I also remember that I never questioned what the enemy was doing, other than fixing me in his sights, other than trying to shoot me down. In those days, the enemy was faceless, formless, heartless; he had only his hands that were an extension of the weapon he fired furiously from his Meeserschmitt, which I struggled to avoid. And the enemy had eyes on the ground too, cruel eyes, appendages to his binoculars that lay in wait for me at the antiaircraft gun-posts. I didn't know, I couldn't imagine that the enemy was himself sure of the rightness of his cause, a cause that he carried deep in his heart along with his own cross of hope. Could the enemy have had a mother? A mother who prayed day and night to the same

God, the same Virgin, the same Archangels and Saints as my own mother did?

“How can you consider such things when you're at war? Death runs rampant all around you and coddles your brain. You see, when the mothers of the rival warriors pray at the same time, God gets confused, He doesn't know who to listen to and so He turns away from this world in disgust.

“But apart from all the things that even today makes me shudder, I often think of Willie, the Canadian pilot who arrived with other of his countrymen to fight alongside us in the summer of '41. Willie was a Canadian Indian. I remember him getting clumsily into the cockpit of his plane – he was heavily built and could only just squeeze himself into that small space. He was silent on take off and silent on landing from our evening sorties. He must have been twenty-two or twenty-three years old, a little older than I was. You couldn't get a word out of him. If you asked him a question he'd give you a one-word reply. He always stood alone in a corner of the mess with a glass of beer or a cup of scalding hot tea. It was a freezing winter that year.

“One night, we returned from a difficult mission and fell exhausted into our bunks fully-dressed, with barely enough energy left to take off our boots. Dawn was breaking. We couldn't get off to sleep. Willie was tossing and turning on the next bunk. Listening carefully, I realised that he was crying. We'd lost half our planes on that raid, and many Canadian pilots had not returned to base.

“I fell asleep. In the morning Willie's eyes were swollen, he'd been awake all night. He was late getting dressed,

and as the others had already left the barracks, we were left alone. Half-dressed, we sat on our bunks facing one-another. I felt the need to comfort him about the compatriots he had lost – Tom, who was my friend, hadn't returned, and Andrew who'd gone down two days before, had grown up in the same neighbourhood as me, we'd signed up together, and I'd cried over his loss.

"Willie looked up. He looked at me with his damp, dark eyes, pushed back a lock of unruly hair from his forehead, and said: 'You don't understand, I'm not crying for those that are lost, I'm crying for those that will be killed in the next raid. Ever since I got here, before every mission I have known which of my comrades are going to be killed, who will fail to return. I can smell death. It's driving me crazy,' he murmured.

"Of course, I didn't believe a word of Willie's story, I put it down to his being so upset, to fatigue, the strain that we were under all the time, the unremitting bombardment of London by the Germans and the fact that we couldn't hold off the Luftwaffe planes. I slapped him genially on the shoulder. 'Come on, Willie, let's go! You'll get over it. You need a rest, that's all.' He smiled as if to say: 'You don't believe me, you can't understand.'

"That evening, when it was time to set out on the night's sortie, Willie came up to me and looked sadly over towards Sean, a noisy, red-haired Irish lad, who was always laughing and joking. Then he looked towards Jim, Tommie, Ron and Mark... I was taken aback. I repeated their names in a

whisper. 'Yes, yes...' replied Willie, confirming my words with a nod of his head.

"And sure enough, Sean, Jim, Tommie, Ron and Mark failed to return that night. The following night it was David and Mike. Before the next mission, Willie was all smiles... everyone came back safely.

"This went on for three weeks until I couldn't bear any more to share the smell of death with my Indian friend and I asked him to keep his secret to himself, not to share the names of those who were doomed to die. He agreed with a nod of his head. Another week went by, and then one evening as we each rushed to our planes, Willie shook my hand as if in farewell. He was shot down a little later as we spotted the French coast in the moonlight.

"As long as the war is going on, you don't have the time to stop and think, or even to be sorry, or to truly feel pain – it's as if you were made to kill.

"But what caused me true pain was a tale of war that really left its mark on me, although I didn't witness the event myself. It was told to me many years later, after the war was over.

"A newspaper, an English newspaper, planned to publish an article on the anniversary of the outbreak of the Second World War. They'd asked various writers who'd taken part in the hostilities to contribute, stressing that the chief editor wasn't looking for a story about the well-known battles that had been won or lost. 'I'm looking for a human-interest story, an unknown event, something that hasn't been written and never will be written in the official history of this war,' he'd

said. 'You see, so many books have been written since the end of the war, so many films have been made, people are tired of it all. And they are tired of the lauding of the victors and the humbling of the vanquished.'

"I left then for Greece, where I was thinking of writing a book about the Great Siege of the Castle of Rhodes during the time of the knights of Saint John. I'd agreed to send the newspaper article from there.

"I was considering writing about the day that Germany had declared war on Greece and had bombed all the Greek ports. Any Greek ships that had not managed to leave Greek waters were sunk. It was the 21st of April, 1941. Many British ships were also hit in Piraeus harbour. One of these was carrying freshly printed bank notes to the Indies along with munitions, and when the German bombs exploded, Piraeus was filled with Indian rupees.

"When I got to Athens, I went to the Allied cemetery in Alimos, where, after searching through the headstones, I found the graves of the sailors who were lost that day. There were twenty of them, all lads aged between 19 and 25. Then I went to Piraeus where, in the Tinanaios Gardens opposite the clock – I think that old building has been pulled down now – a piece of iron from the hull of a British ship that was hit by the Stukas is still embedded in the trunk of an enormous tree.

"It occurred to me to search through the archives of the Ministry of Merchant Marine to find out how many sailors of the Greek Merchant Fleet had been killed that day – the British archives held all the details of the sunken battleships.

I was given a few files to go through, not much to go on, and with the little Greek I know, I began to search through the old, worn papers full of information about the war losses relating to ships on that day.

“As I went from file to file, I paused at the dossier of the ‘s.s. *Socrates*’. It interested me because the *Socrates*, which was sunk by German planes on the 21st of April in the Gulf of Antikyra, was a hospital ship. With the help of a Greek ensign who spoke English, I studied the documents in the dossier.

“It wasn’t the first time that the Germans had bombed a hospital ship, and to be honest, I’ve no idea whether the Allies did the same – we have plenty of details about the Germans doing such things, but as for our own exploits... as an Italian friend of mine once said, history is written by the winners.

“ ‘Antikyra?’ I asked, ‘Where is Antikyra?’ The ensign had no idea where it was. With the help of a map, we found the gulf and the islet that gives it its name at the foot of Mount Parnassos, near the Alcyonides islands. I wondered what the ships had been doing there – apart from the *Socrates*, I’d found reports of another four ships that had been in the area and had escaped the bombing. I looked up the death toll: only one sailor had been lost. He was a nineteen-year-old boy. He might, I thought, have been the very first victim after the Nazi declaration of war on Greece.”

“Antikyra is near to Levadia, which is an hour’s drive from Delphi. I hadn’t been to Delphi since my student days

when, in 1936, my father had taken me to stand, as he'd put it, at 'the navel of the earth'.

"Curious to see the Gulf of Antikyra, I set off on the bus that goes to Delphi via Levadia. In Levadia, I found a taxi driver who was willing to take me to Antikyra. We drove through Distomo where the driver, as I was English – an Ally, that is – stopped to tell me all about the barbarities of the Germans who, in 1943, in retaliation against the activities of the resistance fighters, had executed a hundred random hostages taken from the village – young and old alike.

"When I reached the sea, the view took my breath away.

"In Greece, when spring arrives – whether there is war, whether there is peace – nature flourishes with no regard for man's stupidity. There are wild flowers everywhere, blazing red poppies, dazzling yellow daisies, bright purple anemones and camomile spread out like a white carpet.

" 'Stop here, stop' I told the driver, 'I'd like to walk.' I strolled to a small hill topped by a tiny church, a diminutive church, almost like a toy, the Church of the Prophet Elias. It was a minute building, just one room, and a church bell that hung from a gnarled pine tree. A couple of goats that had strayed from their herd eyed me curiously. And I surveyed the vastness of the sea.

"To my right was Mount Parnassos, where a few clouds hung diffidently. At a distance was the Gulf of Corinth, and you could make out the mountains of the Peloponnesus. Before me was the Gulf of Antikyra, guarded by the islet."

As Traver paused to re-light his pipe he gestured towards the sea.

"Here the sea begins green and then becomes azure blue. The view calms you. Sand, sun, sea, silence. There, the view is awesome. You speak in a whisper so as not to disturb the balance set so long before by the gods.

"The jingling of the goat bells made me turn. The herd had come closer. The goatherd approached – a large-set old man with snow-white hair and moustache – he greeted me with the same curiosity as his goats had shown before. I asked him about the church. He told me it was the Church of *Ay Lias*, Saint Elias. I asked him about an unusual building, looking old and abandoned, that stood isolated on the northern shore. 'It belongs to the Navy,' he said, 'It used to be a repair base.' With his crook, he pointed out two huge anchoring buoys that I had not noticed before.

"It was then that I realised why the '*Socrates*' had been there, why she had sunk immobilised by engine trouble. So that's why she couldn't escape like the other ships had, I thought. So that's why she lies rusting out there in the deep water. I went down to the shore. I came to a tavern where the proprietor, despite the late hour, served me some fish.

"When he brought a carafe of wine to my table, I invited him to join me for a drink. He wasn't a talkative man. He sat down opposite me and looked straight into my eyes warily.

" 'English?' he asked.

" 'Yes', I replied

" 'Ah,' he said with a nod that suggested that he wasn't particularly pleased to make my acquaintance.

“ ‘Archaeologist?’ he asked.

“ ‘No,’ I replied, ‘A traveller.’

“ ‘Ah, a tourist.’ he said.

“I asked him how I could get back to Levadia. His responses to my questions were polite, but brief and to the point. I plucked up the courage to ask him about the bombing of April '41. I thought he must have been around seventy years old, so in 1941 he would already have been over 50 and wouldn't have gone off to war. He looked at me, and then at the sea, lifted his hand and pointed half way between the land and the passage formed by the island.

“ ‘The ship sank right there.’

“ ‘The *Socrates*?’

“ ‘I don't know what it was called; it was a passenger ship – the only one that sank.’

“ ‘Were you here when it happened? Do you remember it?’

“ ‘Yes,’ he nodded, and went on, ‘A young lad was killed. Yes, I remember. I remember he was badly injured when they got him off the ship before it sank. He was burned all over. They took him to the hospital in Levadia. He died there.’

“He shook his head, drank the remaining wine in his glass and wiped his moustache.

“ ‘Do you know why the lad died?’

“He said this quite loudly, emphasising each word, like you do when making sure a small child understands what

you're saying. I looked at him, my expression showing that I did not know why.

" 'For the flag, for the flag. When the ship was hit and it began to burn, there were only three crewmembers on board. The captain, the boatswain and the little sailor. The captain ordered the lad to run to the stern and get the flag while he rushed to the bridge to get the log and other records and the boatswain moved to the dinghy.

" 'Just then, the planes returned and dropped more bombs, and there were more planes and more bombs. The ship burst into flames and began to go down. The captain and the bo'sun ran to look for the lad. When they found him, he was a right mess, clutching the flag tightly. They took him ashore.

" 'Everyone from the village was rushing around – some trying to help, others trying to escape. I'll never forget that scene – the lad at death's door and still holding on tightly to that flag on his chest.'

"He stopped with a look that said: I've said enough, and quickly cleared my table as if to say: You've had your meal and drunk your wine, now be on your way.

"I thought of saying, 'I fought too,' but you know, although the Greeks are usually talkative, even verbose, there are some who manage with just a few words, with just a glance, a frown, or a gesture, to express whole sentences. And the tavern-keeper, as he cleared away the dishes, without a word, made his view clear. He obviously did not like the British for their involvement in the hostilities of the Greek civil war, when they sided with the nationalistic forces against

the communist uprising. So that is as far as our conversation went, and we parted with a short "Giá sas".

"I shan't tell you all about my 'colourful' return to Athens that evening. I rode half way back to Levadia on the back of a mule and the other half in the back of a farmer's truck – a rare thing to find in those days. I was only just in time to catch the last bus back to Athens. When I reached my hotel, even though I was tired, I began to write my article. I finished it the next day. I typed it up and posted it to the paper. I suggested the title: *Heroic Greek sailor dies for his flag*.

"Before taking the boat back to Rhodes, I called in again at the Ministry of Merchant Marine. I wanted to go through the dossier on the *Socrates* to see if I could find out anything more about Yiannis, the heroic youngster who had died at the age of twenty for his country's flag. The ensign I knew there had promised he would write to let me know anything else he found out. And he kept his word.

"Yiannis came from Ioannina. His father was a teacher. The ensign gave me his address. I decided that whenever I was in Northern Greece, I would visit Yiannis' home there and see if I could find his family. I wanted to meet them.

"To this day, I have no idea what it was that made me visit Antikyra and then go on to search the narrow streets of the old town in Ioannina for Yiannis' parents. As I walked the same cobbled streets that Ali Pasha had walked two centuries before, I wondered whether I would find Yiannis' mother and father after so many years. Were they still alive? And if I did find their house, would it be right to talk to

them about that tragic day, 15 years after the loss of their child? Would it be right to bring back painful memories? Obviously I was going to open up old wounds that had begun to heal.

"I hesitated, almost backed out. But I'd already knocked on the door, and just as I was beginning to wish nobody would answer it – I heard a heavy bolt being drawn back, and I found myself face to face with an elderly woman who, with a good-natured look and curiosity in her eyes, asked me what I wanted. It was Yiannis' mother. Just then, his father, the teacher, arrived.

"Days before, I had thought about and rehearsed what I would say to them, and how I would say it. I had even imagined a whole series of possible reactions. I had been through this scene again and again in my mind, and yet, all the words that I had so carefully prepared and judiciously weighed up were lost as soon as the white-haired teacher said: 'Yes, I'm Gikas. How may I help you?'

"I could only stutter: 'I'd like to talk to you in private for a moment, if I may.'

"He sent his wife off to make coffee. The two of us remained silent as we sat in the simple sitting room, a longhaired rug on the floor, the carved chairs depicting scenes of deer and cypress trees.

"At that moment, I regretted not having written to him beforehand, not having forewarned him of my visit. I felt it was quite unacceptable for a stranger to turn up at his house uninvited to talk about the son he'd lost 15 years

before. I felt awful, angry with myself, but what could I do? It was too late to go back now.

"I began by saying that I'd got his address from the Ministry of Merchant Marine, that I was an English writer and that I was researching the sinking of the 'Socrates'. He gestured to me to lower my voice, probably because he didn't want his wife to overhear from the adjoining kitchen. He said in English: 'We can talk in English. I'm an English teacher. My wife won't understand. It'll be better that way. Please, go on...'

"And he carefully listened to what I had to say. About my search of the Ministry files, my trip to Antikyra, the tavern-keeper's story, the article I had written.

"The coffee arrived. He asked his wife to leave us... We had something to discuss, he said. She looked at him curiously. What on earth could a foreigner want in their home? But she discreetly returned to the kitchen.

" 'You understand,' he explained, 'She's still not got over it.'

"We were silent again. Uncomfortably, I looked at the opposite wall where there hung worn, faded photographs. An old man, an old woman, another old man with a huge moustache and a smiling young sailor. The ribbon from a sailor's cap was wrapped around the frame of the last photograph. The words 'S.S. SOCRATES' were printed on it in gold letters on a black background.

"I unfurled the newspaper containing the article I had written. I handed it the teacher and told him he could keep it. He stood up to get his glasses. He glanced at the title,

then looked at me, and took off his glasses. He put them on again, read a little more then stopped... Read a little more then stopped again. He repeated this several times, as if he were bringing back a few at a time the images that he had wanted to forget, images that he wanted to keep away, at least that was the impression I got. Then he folded the paper carefully and placed it on the low table. He took off his glasses once more and, as if continuing a conversation that had begun long before, he said softly, carefully weighing his words and with a slightly trembling voice: 'You know, Yiannis was neither a fighter nor a hero.'

There followed another uncomfortable silence, a pause filled with sorrow. Then he said, as if to relieve my discomfort: 'You wrote what you felt, of course, it's not your fault.' And he went on, choosing his words carefully, 'Yiannis was a student, he was planning to study Law when he was called up. He never managed to study; he never managed to fight. I don't know what you want to know.'

"Without waiting for me to reply, he continued: 'It's not right to glorify war, to laud death. The dead heroes are used as war's stool pigeons, and nobody asks their permission for that. It's terrible... war is terrible, but what is worse is for us to show off the actions of those who've died. It's not your fault. It's the way things have been for generations, for centuries – we make an example of the lost warriors so that we can find others who are prepared to follow their example, to join the parade and who, with a song in their hearts, are ready to kill and to die for a cause.'

“ ‘Then they put up great white marble plaques with tender words, heroic words, words praising their exploits, followed by a long list of the names of the countless lads lost in battle. Nobody asked them when they left this world so prematurely – not because He who gave them life and who alone has the right to take it away had decided that it should be so; not because it was God's will, but because of man's folly – whether they wished to exchange everything they ever dreamt of doing in their lives for a few flattering words – even for words written by poets and blessed by priests.

“ ‘After the war, after the occupation and all the other woes that befell our country, people came to see me – representatives of the state, officers and important people – to praise Yiannis' sacrifice. A service was held; they awarded him a posthumous medal for bravery. They made speeches, and because they felt they hadn't said enough, they even borrowed more words from poems and marshal hymns. They all stood to attention and argued over who was to lay the first wreath in front of the plaque that bore the name of the hero who had swapped his life for three meters of fluttering blue and white cloth. A very special piece of cloth, of course, bearing the cross and stripes that have represented the hopes and the struggles of our nation for a century and a half. They even wanted to put up a statue. The mayor came with an officer to ask for any photographs we might have of Yiannis, because the statue of the young sailor clutching the flag should bear, they said, a resemblance to him.

“ ‘I asked them not to make a statue. They insisted. I begged them not to do it. But they still insisted. They had the impudence to tell me that Yiannis didn't belong to me any more, he belonged to Greece. He should be held up as an example to the generations to come, they said. And I thought that this was exactly what I did not want to happen – for my Yiannis to become an advertisement for future war.

“ ‘And there were moments I wanted to shout at them: Stop! If you really want to erect a memorial to the flag, to the flag that deprived Yiannis of his life, then do it for all those lost in war – our children, as well as their children, regardless of nationality, regardless of borders, of camps – they have all left for that place where such things no longer count. Together let them raise up their hands to reach for a standard bearing the colours of the rainbow and the promise: No more war. No more misery.

“ ‘But I didn't dare to say it. They wouldn't have understood. They put my objections down to excessive modesty and the great pain I was suffering. They left baffled. I was worried that they'd come back and insist once more. But luckily, I never saw them again.

“ ‘They erected many memorials, they found other heroes... So many Greek youngsters were lost, you know. My heart bleeds for them all. I think about them again and again, all the time, it drives me mad, it drives me sad. Why? Why, Lord? I ask. I suffer for our children and for our friends' children, but also for the children of the Italians, the Germans. Oh Lord, why such injustice?’

“And as if in response to my suspicion, he continued, ‘No, I haven’t lost my faith; God knows the reason why, even if He doesn’t answer me. My argument is with man not God.’

“He bowed his head in silence.

“It was getting late but the teacher wouldn’t let me leave. He began to ask me about my life in Rhodes, about my travels to distant places, the books I had written and all sorts of other things. He insisted that I stay for dinner. He called his wife to say that I would be eating with them. While she was preparing the meal and setting the table, he took me for a stroll to the shore of the lake. We didn’t speak again about Yiannis.

“That evening when I returned to my hotel I had a fever. Perhaps it was the dampness of the lake or the chill of the night that followed the heat of the day. I slept fitfully and two or three times woke up suddenly from nightmares. In my dreams I saw something like a giant mosaic made of fragmented images sewn together in splinters of light. The images alternated with the flashes of cannon fire and then, the lost warriors – friends and foes – took up their places side by side to form the memorial that the teacher had said he wanted to erect. They had all thrown down their guns and stood with hands raised high towards a huge flag that fluttered atop an immense flagpole, a standard that bore all the colours of the universe and the hope of a better world, a world of peace. And a whisper could be heard, as if crawling from wounded lips while avid hands

tried to reach the flag: One day, surely one day we will reach you..."

Nobody spoke. We were all tired. Sorial alone commented:

"But still, the day will come when humanity will wonder how it was possible that men fought wars at the end of the 20th century."

No one said anything. Sorial nodded as if to say: Bill, I agree with every word you said, and his expression added: and the way you said it was so moving.

Cécile, I learned later, had wanted to comment that such peace-loving talk was all well and good, but wars would always exist. What were you supposed to do when attacked? Sit with your hands in your lap and wait to be slaughtered?

Miléna looked out at the sea in an attempt to escape, to banish the thoughts that had so disturbed her. She went back to the bus, put on her swimsuit, and, running to minimise the stinging of the scorching sand, dived into the azure-blue sea.



THE UNFAITHFUL WOMAN'S DAY

THE UNFAITHFUL WOMAN'S DAY

Cécile seemed most upset. We were sitting down for breakfast in our usual spot, the corner table near the big window that looked out over the Corniche as far as Qait Bey. She lit a cigarette and apologised for smoking at the table. She announced that she was about to relate an incredible and appalling event that had unravelled before her eyes a little earlier.

She had got up very early that morning. With the first light of day, she went out onto her balcony. It was chilly. The sea was as calm as glass, resting from the long night's struggle with the shore, relaxing under a light blanket of mist. Cécile recalled how she had felt as a ten-year-old girl, when her father would sometimes take her out fishing in his boat at dawn. That was how the morning smelt, that was how cool it was. She felt good.

Without pausing for thought, Cécile decided to go for a walk along the Corniche. She dressed hurriedly and went

out into the street. The dozing policeman guarding the hotel entrance, looking a little surprised to see her going out alone so early, performed a long, protracted bow. The square was empty, almost deserted. There were not many cars on the roads and just a few workers waiting for the tram at the station. Cécile strolled contentedly along the pavement on the far side of the Corniche towards Ramleh.

"I must have been walking for about ten minutes. I passed the 'Athinaios' pâtisserie where my parents used to take me as a treat when I was a little girl. I wandered on towards Silsileh, just strolling without any particular aim or in any particular direction, free. I liked that. Suddenly, I heard a noise coming from the entrance of a handsome okella, and a half-naked woman appeared in front of me. She was being shoved by a thickset, well-dressed, middle-aged man.

"An old black limousine that reminded me of a hearse was waiting for them at the kerbside. The driver stood holding the rear door open. The woman walked towards it without a sound. She hesitated before the open car door. With one hand she unconsciously tried to cover her heavy breasts that fell from the broken straps of her flimsy silk nightgown, and with the other she supported herself on the doorframe of the car. She made as if to turn back. But to no avail, the fat man with the fierce moustache gave her a heavy kick in the behind with such force that she fell into the back of the old Desoto.

"The driver hurriedly started the engine while that horrible gorilla of a man got clumsily into the back seat. To

make room for himself, he gave the poor woman two or three hard slaps forcing her to move over, to make space for him. All this went on in absolute silence, like an old silent movie. Nothing was said, not a word of complaint from the woman. Just one word from that beastly man as he closed the door: Whore... and he spat on her.

"Even though the street was still more or less empty, two or three men had gathered outside the bawaba. One of them was the bawab, the others, who wore gallabeyas too, had just appeared like phantoms out of nowhere. Silently, they watched the scene, and only after the car had drawn away did they comment dourly on what had taken place."

"My Arabic is poor," Cécile explained, "But I can remember some – and then I used to hear my husband speaking Arabic from time to time. One of the men lifted his eyes up to heaven, sighed deeply and said: 'Merciful Allah, what has the world come to?' But of course, from his point of view, the world had turned bad not because the young woman had been dragged outside in that cruel manner, but because the gorilla had had to go to the trouble of beating some sense into her.

"The second man was more specific: 'She deserved it, the whore...' The third, the one who must have been the janitor, declared morosely: 'Poor Amin Effendi... The distress will surely kill him. He is fat and has high blood pressure....'

"I just stood there, rooted to the spot in shock. To tell you the truth, I was terrified. Luckily, they didn't pay me much

attention, although they did give me some funny looks. I turned on my heel and hurried back to the hotel."

"Mon Dieu, ah! mon Dieu," cried Cécile, as if reliving the awful scene.

She took thirsty, short sips of her coffee and smoked her cigarette with a passion.

"I can't forget the woebegone look that woman gave me as she tumbled into the back seat of the car. It was so full of fear; you could feel not only her shame, but also the fact that she was resigned to her fate."

And Cécile, as if in answer to some unspoken question, acknowledged:

"Yes, she was young. Yes, she was pretty."

She pronounced these words with indignant righteousness, as if it were up to her to justify the behaviour of the unfaithful woman, as if her youth and beauty were excuse enough for whatever she had done.

There was a pause. Cécile's face was flushed, harsh, the customary smile which hid her feelings like a veil in troubled moments was gone.

She too had been young and beautiful when Prince Ali Toussoum had first set eyes on her, when he had been blinded by the beauty of the twenty-year-old Jean Dessès fashion model. He had only recently been widowed. He was almost sixty. They were separated by a whole lifetime. She, who had come to Paris two years before from Alexandria where she had graduated from the Convent School, had just opened a window and was tentatively preparing to go out into the resplendent world. He had already travelled a

long way and was getting ready to close the door behind him.

As a child, Ali had visited the South of France with his father, who was first cousin to Fouad, and his mother, who was the daughter of an English major, born in Egypt. Fouad was then still viceroy and, strictly speaking, owed allegiance to the Sultan. In reality, Egypt was a British protectorate and Constantinople, facing innumerable difficulties in its floundering empire, held no authority in the Land of the Nile. The princely couple, their young son and four daughters were living on the Côte d'Azur with dozens of servants, maids, grooms, gardeners and hangers-on.

Ali never returned to Egypt. But despite his mixed blood and the distance that separated him from Egypt, he retained many of the characteristics of his homeland. He remained a devout Muslim and followed many Arab customs, mixed with some European refinement.

He was good to Cécile, attentive, generous. He put up with all her whims, armed with his oriental patience and the wisdom that often comes with age.

They were soon married. For Cécile, Ali was father – the father she had lost when she was so young – husband and benefactor; her Pygmalion. From the changing rooms of Dessès, Cécile found herself in the resplendent halls of the Eden Rock, the Monte Carlo Casino, the Hôtel de Paris and the Negresco. The dreadful war was over and the rich who had managed to hold onto their fortunes were enjoying a free and easy life, like the Belle Époque of the inter-war years. They gathered along the narrow stretch of land between

the foothills of the Alps and the sea, from Menton as far as St.-Raphael. Most of them were idle gadabouts without any sort of profession, but what they all had in common was the desire to have a good time and the means to live in that high-priced paradise. They crowded into Nice, Cannes, Antibes, Monte Carlo, Villefranche – Lords, gamblers who gazed at the beaches from the chaises-longues of their yachts, maharajahs and their wives who had left the trouble-torn Indies, bringing their precious stones and gold with them along with the rest of their lives. Repentant Italian fascists, tax evaders, dapper rogues flaunting non-existent titles on their visiting cards. High class tarts, butterflies of the night, bleary by money. Pseudo-aristocrats, fugitives from countries where the iron curtain had just fallen – making it hard to verify the authenticity of the Count or Countess who insisted on adding the prerequisite 'de' to their already unpronounceable names. All of them dreaming that some time soon they would strike it lucky.

“Welcome, Count Balamy. Do come in...”

“De Balamy, my dear, de...”

An endless list of loafers who had either set up permanent residence on the Riviera or who came and went from neighbouring Italy, Switzerland or even England. The Greek shipping tycoons soon arrived, pockets bulging from their scheming and barratry and the pickings of the American aid and war reparations.

In the summer, Cécile found the crowded Côte d'Azur tiresome, so they would move to Paris where they had a residence in the 1st arrondissement, not far from the Ritz.

When they wanted to get away from it all, they would go to their farm in Brittany, near St.-Malo, which the Prince had bought as a wedding present for his young bride.

And if they wanted to leave dry land, they would up-anchor the 'Baraka', their yacht, which had been built for the last Kaiser. At least, so it was said. Ali's father had set sail with his family from Alexandria on that yacht and moored in the gulf of Villefranche, as the boat was too large to fit in any of the marinas.

That was in 1918, when there was political unrest in Egypt as Saad Zaghloul demanded independence. The British found his insistence preposterous and exiled him to Malta. Osman Toussoum Pasha, Ali's father, wanted nothing to do with politics. He had inherited huge cotton plantations in the Nile Delta from his father and grandfather. The fine Egyptian cotton was already sold to the British weavers – why should he get involved in politics?

Thousands of fellaheen laboured day and night in the muddy fields where the white gold grew. "Egypt is a gift of the Nile," Herodotus had said, and we might add: "and the cotton feeds Egypt."

Whole villages in the regions of Mehalla el Kobra, Kafr el Zayat, Zagazig, Tantah and Benha belonged to the Prince. Neither Ali nor his father had ever seen any of the plantations for themselves. Nor could they imagine the toils of the fellaheen. They knew nothing of the moody ways of the Nile, how the impetuous waters carried the red mud from the plateaux of Ethiopia, the plains of Sudan, and overflowed each year, following age-old habit, flooding

the land. Then the waters would recede, leaving behind them the blessed fertile mud.

They knew nothing of the hauling of the cotton to the shounas, the vast storehouses at Minet el Bassal near the port of Alexandria, where the poorly paid Greek clerks of the Benakis, Salvagos and Zerbinis families checked it, recorded it, coddled it, weighed it and loaded it onto the ships of the Ellerman Line, Wescott and Lawrence and the Wilson Line, to be transported to the British ports of Liverpool, Blackpool, Cardiff. Nor did they know about the endless lines of looms in Manchester, Lancashire, Westmoreland in Wales, where from dawn till dusk workers with frozen fingers followed the frantic shuttling to-and-fro of the yarn.

That innocent, somehow ugly, fluffy little white flower that bloomed every year like a puffed up hazelnut, made fortunes for the beys and the pashas, made Greek traders and British ship-owners and industrialists rich. The cotton also fed foremen, managers, bookkeepers and all sorts of office clerks and technicians. Countless humble workers survived thanks to the trade in cotton, labouring in its production, transportation and spinning. A great chain made up of thousands of tightly bound links, endless, complex and diverse.

The links in the chain were uneven, each different, but all essential. Some were made of gold, bringing with them great wealth that only generations of opulent and extravagant living could use up. Others were made of silver and promised times of plenty. And there were brass links that said, "Thank God, we didn't do too badly today. We'll

see what tomorrow brings." But most of the links in the chain were made of iron. There were so many of those, tightly inter-linked. Hand in hand they amassed in the vast fields. They should have become rusty with the damp rising from the great river, the harsh sun never managing to dry them out. And yet they were the ones who held the chain together – the fellaheen and the pallid workers in dampness of Britain's factories. They would have gone rusty too, but they never did, lubricant-soaked as they were by the constant sweat and the blood of their souls.

The fellaheen sang to keep the sun high in the sky, to prolong the day, while tiny, evil, treacherous schistosoma – the bilharzia parasites – burrowed into the soles of their bare feet and ate up their insides. But they kept on singing to spite the easy-living rich. The local children played happily outside their mud huts. They swam naked in the murky waters of the Nile, watched the feluccas as they sailed past with their enormous triangular sails, like gigantic mythical, melancholic swans gliding slowly down the river of life. They were runny-nosed, flies nestling at the corner of their eyes, but the lines around their mouths were happy, smiling, laughing, as if to shout out to all those well-washed, well-dressed, well-fed people on the opposite bank: "We're here, we are afloat, beware."

Blessed cotton that assured everyone in the Valley of a bowl of fowl, a little rice from time to time, and on special days, some piping hot bread with tahina. The fellaheen endured, survived, they grew in number, while the beys and the pashas, the merchants and the middlemen rubbed their

hands together greedily. In the same way, despite the cold and privation, the children of the weavers and the factory workers survived in the North. And they kept on playing, romping boisterously in the cobbled streets, whipping the top, stoning the crows on the threshing floor – enjoying life.

Mothers, with pale cheeks and reddened noses, inhaled avidely the sparse rays of sunlight that swiftly, secretly, sneaked inside their frosty homes -- the sun was cautious not to be seen siding with the poor. Then, looking above the frantic rush of the looms, with the fortitude of those whose fate it is to cling firmly on to life by just one single thread, just one tiny ray of sun, they would say: "Today is a beautiful day."

Blessed cotton that assured the fellah of his foul pie and henna for his wives to paint the soles of their feet and the palms of their hands in accordance with the age-old traditions of the tribe.

Blessed cotton that granted ten offspring to every household and made it possible for little Heba to delight in her *arousa* on the feast of the Great Bairam. It seemed a shame to eat the coloured sugar doll all at once. For hours on end she savoured it, nibbling its sweet body a little at a time.

Blessed Egyptian cotton that gave Rosalind, the young English mother with the worn-out lungs, the pleasure of roasting a turkey, overstuffed with chestnuts, on Christmas Day and presenting her daughter with a modest rag-doll that, to her, glittered like a fairy-tale princess.

But Just, as the Almighty is – whether we call him God or Allah – He did not share out all his blessings and pleasures only to the poor, there was always something left over for Ali's father – and so, from the cotton he acquired more palaces in Cairo, in Alexandria. Country houses, feluccas, yachts, Swiss bank accounts and the most beautiful women young, buxom, obedient and faithful.

One day, Osman Toussoum Pasha was taking the train from Cairo to Alexandria. Bored, he was looking out of the window when he saw a group of fellaheen working in the fields. It was unbearably hot and there was not a breath of wind. The date palms that with the slightest breeze seized the opportunity to shake their heads playfully were as still as granite statues. Even the flies were sleepy, lethargically dozing on the glass of the carriage window. To cool the Pasha, two beefy Negroes with half-open mouths rhythmically raised and lowered huge wicker fans, like the flapping of the wings of a mythical dragon. In the rear seats of the private wagon sat his four most favoured wives who accompanied him, resentful of the unbearably hot journey. Swaddled as they were from head to foot, they could find no respite from the heat. They called the maidservants to open the window, but as soon as the hot desert air rushed in, they ordered them to close it again.

The Pasha, annoyed by the fuss the women were making, stood up imperiously, turned, looked at them sternly, and without saying a word, with just one movement of his hand, he ordered: "Enough, that's enough. Silence."

And all was quiet. The women calmed down, rocking silently with the movement of the train while the maidservants, eyes round with apprehension, held their breath fearfully.

Afterwards, Osman Toussoum, who was strict, but at heart a good and just man, looked out of the window once more. The fellahin were carrying large clay pots to and from the river, balancing them on their heads with the alacrity of acrobats. All around them little children played, ran, chased one another like God's sparrows trying to pick up the crumbs He promised them.

It was then that the Prince asked himself for the very first time whether perhaps the wealth of this world was unfairly divided out. Ali, who was a boy at the time, heard his father calling Girgis Effendi, his Copt secretary. Girgis was a trustworthy man, the Pasha's confidant. He was gaunt, slightly built, with thin grey hair and a pockmarked, haggard face the colour of the very earth. He settled in the seat opposite to receive the orders of his master.

"Tell me," the Pasha said, "You, an educated man, well-travelled, you know the commands of our Holy Book as well as the teachings of your Jesus, why did Allah share out the riches of this world so unfairly? Why do some have so much while others have so little? Why does one man live in a palace and another in a mud hut? Why does one travel by train and another on camelback? One has a donkey, another has nothing, and has to go on foot. One man already savours the delicacies promised to the just in the afterlife by our Great Prophet, while others do not have

enough bread to fill their stomachs, and have to make do with vague promises of things to come. Answer me, son of the infidel, for ever since these thoughts first crossed my mind, they've been upsetting me."

"May Allah grant you long life," began the sallow-faced Copt, scratching his head, "Do not put such thoughts into your head. It is not right. When men start thinking such things they become unhappy. It's just the heat and the humidity unsettling you." He looked towards the west where the horizon was hazy. "The *khamsin* is coming, but not to worry. In an hour we'll be in Iskandereya. The carriages will be waiting for us at the station and in just a few minutes we'll be at your villa on the coast. You'll cool down there and your mood will change."

"Oh, Girgis, you sly old thing. Why do you never give a straightforward answer? Tell me how you feel about all this, what do you think?" He had lowered his voice and was speaking in an almost friendly tone.

"My Pasha," said Girgis Effendi, sweetening his own voice and, holding up the palms of his hands, he asked, "Why did Allah make each finger different?"

He touched his thumb and said, "Do you think this finger asks why his small brothers are so thin? Do you think, my Pasha, that the camel with two humps wonders why there are camels with only one hump? Why does the Nile water the narrow valley and the Delta so generously? Why does it wastefully spill what is left into the White Sea, while a glance away the desert thirsts for just one drop of water? Why does Allah, the All-knowing, the Merciful – your and

my One and Only God – send plentiful rain down upon the lakes, the seas, the rivers, generously soaking them, and yet meanly neglect the endless sand dunes? Why are the bats damned to fly madly around in the sickly glow of the moon, while the gulls, God's chosen ones, playfully enjoy the light of the day?"

He shook his head sadly, disapprovingly. "It is not right, my Pasha. Even the thought of questioning the order of things is disrespectful. Why does God give to those who have, while He denies the poor everything? Because these things are His to give. He may do with them what He will. Who are we to question His intentions? Do not question such things.

"Of course, recently in Europe – all evil things begin there – some people, they say, are trying to bring about equality," he smiled scornfully as he pronounced the word. "But all that they will achieve is to hurt both the rich and the poor. The poor man becomes dissatisfied when he compares his state with that of the rich man. There should be no measure of such things, no comparison.

"Happiness, my Pasha, just as unhappiness – except in rare cases – is not a set concept. It is the comparison of now with before, of me with him.

"Do you recall last week, when you ate too many prickly pears and you thought you would die from the colic? Remember the commotion when the doctor gave you that purgative and you had to go hungry for two whole days afterwards? Nothing but tea, remember? How wonderful that first plate of rice that Taha prepared for you

tasted! Remember, praise be to Allah, how you extolled his cooking, even if it was only plain rice and lemon that he had prepared."

There was a pause. Osman Toussoum Pasha was reflective. After a while, Girgis continued:

"The poor fellaheen that you saw a while back, whose poverty so distressed you, have nothing with which to compare today that is worse than yesterday. They hope only for a better tomorrow. This is good. You should never take away a man's hope. But what is best for them is an abstract, vague, uncertain hope.

"Let us imagine for a moment that today you provide these poor people with a wonderful meal, that they eat their fill. Tomorrow they will want the same. The day after that they will want more. Then if you do not feed them in the same manner, they will become unhappy, because they will be comparing two different states of being. They will not accept a return to the old ways. And, you know, the more you give them, the more they will ask for. Soon you will not be able to get by yourself. From repressed, as you see them now, they will become repressors. And so you will lose your fortune, in which case, they might lose everything and starve.

"And then, if I may, I would like to say one last thing, my Pasha, afterwards I shall trouble you no more. Once a year when I visit all your lands, I do not restrict myself to simply inspecting the foremen – who are a bunch of thieves, damn them – but I visit the farm workers too. I sit with them and find out what they are thinking, how they see life.

“Well, last year, at your plantation outside Zagazig, as I was resting in the shade of a fig tree, a young man stopped to talk to me. And what was it that he wanted to say, do you think? That they work too hard and do not earn enough even to eat. I did not stop him, I let him go on. I encouraged him to open up and tell me more. I even appeared to be agreeing with him, to feel sorry for him. He told me his mother was sick, his father almost blind, and he reeled off all sorts of other woes in such an endearing tone that, if I hadn't been experienced and well prepared, I might even have pitied him. But I thought, let us see where he is going with all this, and I allowed him to continue. He became overconfident. He asked me: To whom does the Nile belong? – Why, to the Khedive, I replied. After all, it passes through his land.”

“That's right,” nodded the Pasha.

“But – the young fellah claimed – the rain that fills the Nile comes from the sky, and the sky belongs to Allah. He sends the rain for us all and, as the fields of the Pasha are irrigated by the waters of God, and as he is our God, is not some portion of the crop rightly ours? – I was astounded. I had never heard such reasoning, and certainly never expected it from a young fellah. I should stress that the lad did not pronounce these impertinent thoughts provocatively. By the tone of his voice, he was not demanding anything, just airing unacceptable concepts.

“You miserable creature – I said – what portion are you talking about? Do you know about the dam that the Khedive built on the Delta so that the waters that your God

sends should not be lost? Do you know how many canals have been built, how much work has been done? Have you any idea how many storehouses our Pasha has erected to protect the crops, how many employees he pays, how many of your people he feeds? With whose money has all this been done, eh? Tell me. With yours? Or with loans from Allah?

“And what do you think he replied? – The cotton pays for everything, Girgis Effendi.

“I was lost for words. The blood rushed to my head. Where did you read such things? I asked him. When did you learn to read? Who taught you? – But I don't know how to read, he replied with an ingenuous and quite dangerous smile.

“By that time, I was truly worried, because if he had read these ideas somewhere, it would not have been so terrible, I could just have explained to him that they had been written by an enemy of Allah, of the Khedive, of the Sultan. But, you see, he had come up with these ideas all by himself. I was in a panic. When I left him, I asked the *shawish* who was accompanying me to find out his name. Tahir, it was. I went to the *omdeh* and we called the *kaymakam* immediately. I told them the whole story in front of the foreman.

“They were shocked. Of course, if the foreman had been doing his job properly and had kept his ears open...” He shook his head as if in despair, “Anyway, the three of them assured me that they would put an end to the ruminations of this budding revolutionary.

"Weeds should be pulled up before they take root," said Girgis, making a tearing sound and a gesture as if uprooting a feisty weed! *Hraatch...*

He continued more calmly, lowering the tone of his voice:

"My Pasha, I feel this on my travels in Europe. I see it in the writings of learned men that I have read most carefully. We are entering the age of 'I want more, and more'."

"Enough," said the Pasha, obviously upset, "That's enough."

Girgis Effendi bowed his head deferentially. He returned to his seat satisfied that he had done his duty, while Osman Toussoum, the youngest grandson of Mohamed Ali of Cavala, founder of the dynasty that ruled Egypt, turned his gaze away, towards the opposite window that looked out to the west. Reflectively, he gave himself up to the *tak, tak, tak* of the wagon on the rails; the landscape faded before him. He lit a cigarette, looked at Ali, his son, who had been following the whole conversation.

"Ali," he said, "The young fellah was right. But his right goes against what is in our interests. If he gets his justice, we will be poor, and that would be unfair too. If I did not have so much to lose, I would try to make the world a fairer place, but I can't, not now. And the truth is that wealth is no prerequisite for happiness, just as poverty does not always mean unhappiness."

Ali remembered that journey well. He had told Cécile all about it in great detail. She had agreed with the advice of Girgis Effendi, although she also felt sorry for Tahir, who

was never heard of again. However, she was actually more concerned about the condition of Egyptian women.

In the meantime, Sorial had arrived and without interrupting, had wished us good morning. He had heard most of Cécile's story. Breaking the silence, he said in French: "*C'est abominable*. What barbaric behaviour! Of course, custom and tradition here are very strict. A wife belongs to her husband. An unmarried woman belongs to her future husband, whenever he should come along.

"You never see a woman on the beach here in a swimsuit. If she's really daring, she'll go into the sea in a full-length night-gown. A woman's beauty is to be enjoyed by her husband alone. It's not always easy for Europeans passing through to understand that. Cécile's example is extreme. Those sort of problems are not usually resolved in public."

And looking at Cécile as if to reassure her, said:

"Amin Effendi's wayward wife will come out of this with a black eye, no more. It'll be a long time before she thinks of being unfaithful again, but she will. As my father used to say, once it's begun... you can't hold on to a woman. But then again, why doesn't he just divorce her – it's a simple matter for the Muslims – well, because he obviously loves her. That's why he beat her. He cares about her. Amin Effendi is deeply hurt, he's suffering."

"But, monsieur Sorial," replied Cécile, confused, "You are a Christian. Don't tell me that you agree with this repression, with the humiliation of women!"

"No, no," said Sorial, "But as you said, I am a Christian and I am unmarried, so whatever I say carries no weight. The rules of acceptable behaviour are formed by the majority, and I, as a follower of Christ and a confirmed bachelor, am in the minority."

But even Sorial's quip did not manage to alter the Princess' mood.

Miléna made no comment. She was thinking that this behaviour was part of the individuality of the place. The previous day she had commented to an American woman whom she had met in the Midan and who was complaining about the flies that were everywhere, that a trip abroad is a 'package deal': you have to take all that it offers – the things you like and the things you don't. An exotic place in particular bears no comparisons. You just have to take it as it is, accept the people as they are. You did not come here to change the place, but to get to know it.

Traver continued to carefully butter his hot toast. The expression on his face told us that he was determined to enjoy the Cecil's splendid, tasty breakfast. What happened to the unfaithful woman was, for the moment at least, of no concern to him.

It occurred to me that the luscious young beauty might not have been Amin Effendi's wife, but his lover, a dancer perhaps, or – what was it they used to call them in the old days – an 'artiste', a kept woman. I did not say anything so as not to re-ignite the subject Cécile found so upsetting. But Traver, it seemed, had simply been postponing his contribution to the conversation, and as soon as he had

finished with his breakfast he took up where Cécile and Sorial had left off:

“Yes, indeed, in more or less all cultures and in all social groups – with very few exceptions – polygamy is accepted as natural for a man, and yet we want our women to be faithful, devoted to one mate.”

Then he looked at Cécile and said, “As I was listening to you, I recalled a really tragic tale. A true story, something that happened right here, at the ‘gates’ of Alexandria, some two hundred years ago. When you hear this narrative, you’ll agree with our friend Sorial here, that what happened to today’s unfaithful woman is a joke in comparison with the punishment an ancestor of hers suffered. And then perhaps you’ll judge the betrayed Amin Effendi – who I’m sure at this moment is suffering much more than his buxom sugar-doll – a little more leniently.”

Without asking whether we were in the mood to hear another story about an unfaithful Arab woman, Traver took us back to the Alexandria of 1798:

“It was just two days after the landing of Bonaparte’s forces at the bay of the Marabout to the west of Alexandria – the modern-day Borg el Arab. The city, with its walls in ruins, surrendered to the 36,000 troops and 10,000 sailors of the invader without resistance.

“A small group of French soldiers, about ten of them, on horseback, were sent out to reconnoitre the road to Cairo. The sun was high in the sky as they crossed the old bridge over the canal, the *Kadig* as the Arabs called it. There were a few date palms along the side of the rough, poorly made

road. The horses' hooves kicked up clouds of dust as they galloped along. They hadn't gone far when they heard a moaning sound, like a sickly woman's wailing. A little further down the road they came across the form of a woman sitting in the dirt. Her body was completely covered by a muddy *melaya*, while her head and face – unlike the other Arab women they had seen – were bare. She was dishevelled and as she wept and wailed, whispered, indecipherable words came from her lips, as if she were pleading with the few passers-by who ignored her, speeded up their step and entered the village without stopping. With the sound of the approaching horsemen, the woman turned her face towards them and, gathering all the courage she had left, found the strength to plead louder. The riders stopped out of curiosity and two or three of them dismounted. It was then that they saw that the woman held a new-born baby boy in her lap. They took a closer, more careful look. Her fingers were bloody, her clothes stained with blood and mud. When the leader of the detachment, an officer, bent down to see what was happening, he was shocked to find that the woman had recently been blinded. Her eyes had been gouged out, and from the wounded empty sockets ran two black streams of clotting blood, crawling with flies.

“It was July and the sun was merciless. The officer asked the Arab interpreter to explain what was happening, what the woman was saying, what it was that she was repeating over and over again in that awful monotonous weak moan. The interpreter asked a white-bearded old man who was

sitting cross-legged on the opposite side of the road in the thin shade of a date palm.

“ ‘No,’ he reported back to the officer, ‘The woman is not begging for charity as you might imagine, nor does she ask anything for herself. She is simply asking for a little water for her baby. Leave me, she says, I am worthy of my fate. It is what I deserve. Let Allah turn His face away from me. Let me suffer, let me die, but what is this little babe to blame? Save him. Show some compassion and Allah shall reward you.’

“She continued to plead even more insistently; full of yearning now that there were foreigners, strangers nearby: ‘A little water for my baby, a little water to cool him, he is dying.’

“One of the French soldiers, a young beardless lad, was so moved that he took his flask and knelt down to offer water to the mother so that she could quench her child’s thirst. But suddenly, a small, ugly, horribly humped little man jumped out like a ghost from behind the date palm where he had been hiding. Growling, and with the nimbleness of a wild beast, he kicked the flask away. The water quickly spilled out and was sucked up thirstily by the sand. The wretched man leapt back screaming and gesticulating, reproaching the interference of the foreigners. His eyes were wild, ready to jump out of their sockets like bullets fired at the foreigners. There was white froth coming from the corners of his mouth. He had unwound his turban and shook the cloth angrily in his two hands while his long, greasy hair stood on end like the fur of a frenzied cat. The soldier grabbed for the handle

of his sword and whipped it out of its sheath. The ugly dwarf leapt even further back, out of range of the weapon. He continued to screech hysterically.

“ ‘No, *ya sahib*, wait my friend,’ pleaded the interpreter, pushing aside the soldier’s sword. ‘Don’t be hasty. Listen first, wait, you will understand.’

“On the other side of the road – the village side – a group of filthy, ragged, wild-looking creatures had gathered, as if they had sprung out of a nightmare. They stood silently near to the old man, who was still sitting, calmly watching. Each of them menacingly leaned on a thick stick. They said nothing, but the sound of their breathing was heavy and ominous.

“The interpreter continued: ‘this woman has shamed her husband. He blinded her so that she would not look upon a man in the short time that is left for her to live. They cannot kill her; no one wants to take that sin upon himself, so they will leave her to die of thirst and hunger.’

“ ‘But the child,’ protested the soldier, ‘The child is not to blame.’

“ ‘The child is the fruit of iniquity, proof of her husband’s shame. Do not give him water,’ the interpreter implored the soldiers. ‘Do not prolong his agony. See? He has stopped crying. He is quiet now. It will all be over soon.’

“The soldier looked to his companions who stood stunned ready to draw their swords. They turned to their officer, waiting for an order, a sign. He remained calm.

“ ‘Men,’ he said, ‘We came here on a mission. I have precise orders. The people here have their own customs,

their own laws. Barbaric, wicked, horrible ways. We came here to bring justice, civilisation, to relieve repression. But our positions are not as yet secured. We must conquer Cairo – al Kahera – the capital city of these wretched people. Battles await us in this ancient land that has fallen into such decline. Let us go. We must not intervene.'

"And the ten heavily armed soldiers spurred their mounts and rode towards the south without looking back.

"The story doesn't tell us whether the beardless young soldier wept when he realised that what is right often takes second place to what is in our best interest. This event was recorded by a French historian in '*L'Expédition de l'Égypte*', that's where I read it," said Traver.

"Just before nightfall, the detachment of soldiers passed through the same place on their way back to the city. It was deserted. The crowd of people had disappeared. The date palms continued to shake their proud, bushy heads indifferently. It was as if nothing had happened. An old donkey, tired, harmless, wandered freely, searching for a little grass to eat. A huge, startled lizard shot behind the rubble that lay near where the mother had sat earlier with her child. The soldiers came to the low hill where, in ancient times, the *Serapeum* had stood. Under it, subterranean galleries had held parchments and papyri from one of the famed libraries of Alexandria, the essence of ages of knowledge. Now, desolate and alone, only the column of Diocletian stood there, the column they called 'Pompey's Pillar' in the age of lost knowledge.

“They looked to the west. The angry, blood-red sun was setting into the sea, as if furious that he had not managed to scorch every human, as if he wanted to shout out loud: I’m sick of you all, you worthless intruders, you spoilers of nature! And yet, the sun was an accomplice, a ‘Bound Prometheus’, because he did nothing to stop it, but simply dived into the sea, lighting her up with his rage. The sky turned purple, while outside the ruined walls of that once Great City fires were lit in the French encampment outside Bab Sidra, the ancient Gate of the Moon.”

Cécile rose decisively as if to shake off the ugly images that had built up in her mind.

“In the end,” she said, “Getting up early today wasn’t such a good idea. Good intentions don’t always pay off.”

Sorial did not like Traver’s story at all. He had read it himself, but he thought that the Englishman had chosen an importune time to tell it. It seemed almost like an act of hostility towards Cécile. He declared “*Enfin*,” and reminded us all that we had agreed to go on a trip to Rashid.

“Come along,” he said, “We’d better be getting started.”

Miléna announced that she would prefer to stay in town. She wanted to take her time and revisit the ancient monuments on her own – Pompey’s Pillar and the Necropolis at Anfoushi, Kom el Shougafa and Mustapha Pasha.

For this trip, Sorial had brought along his old car which soon started up willingly as if happy to be back in action.

As we drove, our Coptic friend gave us a guided tour. The journey took about an hour.

Rashid – Rosette or Rosetta – is a town built on the western side of the Nile estuary (Damietta being on the eastern side). It is a typical Arab town that takes you back to centuries past. In its centre, five or six large, multi-storey buildings from the 17th century have been restored, as well as a number of interesting large mosques that bear witness to the importance of the city over many hundreds of years. Travellers and pilgrims on their way back from Sinai and Cairo – Old Fostat – used to travel down the Nile on feluccas as far as Rashid. From there, once they had paid taxes on their belongings to the Jewish customs officer, they would continue on their way to Alexandria. Some would hire a *garib* – a local fishing boat – to take them to Alexandria in a day. Others took the more difficult route over land that after 65 kilometres would bring them to Bab Rashid, the Rosetta Gate. Sorial reminded his friends that the famed remains found at the Shalalat gardens, are all that is left of the Mediaeval ruins of this Gate. In ancient times, when the city of Alexandria was more extensive, the Eastern Gate had been further to the east, somewhere near Ramleh, and was called the Gate of the Sun.

But do not imagine that during and after the Middle Ages visitors to Alexandria came to admire the ancient capital city of the Ptolemies, rival to Athens, Rome and Constantinople. They knew from the reports of other travellers that the city of Alexander was just a pile of ruins. But most of them were Christian pilgrims who were more interested in the city of St. Mark the Evangelist and St. Catherine the Great Martyr than in the ruined buildings of idol worshippers.

In those days, arrival at the walls of the Islamic Iskandereya was a disappointment to the educated European traveller.

“ ‘Infidels’ entered and left the city through a special gate, on particular days and at set times. Directions, accompanied by much shouting and abuse, were given to their way-worn caravans from atop the walls, and if the exhausted travellers went to the wrong gate or arrived on the wrong day, they might be met with a pelting of stones. They were kept waiting interminably and harassed and outrageously exploited by the cameleers and the mule-drivers, who bargained very hard over their remuneration for every hour of delay.

And then, at last, it was time to enter the ‘no-man’s-land’ between the two walls, where the travellers were trapped. Here began the humiliation of being searched in front of the customs officer, who often went as far as stripping even religious men naked. It was followed by the imposition of taxes. This applied to everyone, whether they were tradesmen or just visitors. *Bakshish* had to be handed out repeatedly at every step in the labyrinth of formalities that seemed to follow no precise rules.

Eventually, as exhausted as holy martyrs preparing to receive their reward for their trials and tribulations, as their faith decrees, the travellers would reach the interpreter, the *tarjuman*. He was an important person who spoke the languages of the Europeans, who interceded with the governor of the city, the highest authority in Alexandria.

When they had finally sorted out all the formalities, often without understanding what was going on or why they were being hauled from shack to shack, the much awaited hour would come when the group of travellers, still under severe restrictions, was free to visit their consul, or some foreign consular authority representing their nation. The religious men would go to pay their respects to their bishop.

Of course, there were no such things as hotels. Visitors had to go to the *foundouk* – *fondice*, as the Italians called them, or *fondiques*, as they were known to the French – something like primitive inns. Luggage, merchandise or other bulky items the travellers had with them, was stored on the ground floor in rooms built around an interior courtyard. The visitors slept on the first floor.

At sunset, the governor's military commander would lock up every *foundouk* from the outside and take the keys away with him. He would open the main door again the following morning, except for Fridays, when the 'infidels' remained under lock and key until after the faithful of Allah had completed their midday prayers. Not a good place for claustrophobics!

Among the things that were forbidden for foreigners to do was to visit the city walls or to go up to any sort of high ground – especially Kom el Dikka and Kom el Nadoura – from where they could gain a panoramic view of the city and its two ports. They were also forbidden from entering Muslim shrines. Even the ruined courtyard of the Attarine Mosque, the Early Christian Church of Saint Athanasios, was out of bounds for Christians.

And one final prohibition: any traveller who looked upon an Arab woman with her face unveiled as she hung out her washing on the terrace of her house would be most severely punished. It is even said that this is the reason that, up until the times of Mohamed Ali, Christian vessels were denied access to the Western Harbour, the ancient *Eunostos*, and were limited to the Eastern port. The Western Harbour bordered upon the New City, built in the time of the Mameluks on the site of the ancient Heptastadion, and it would have been possible for Christian sailors, climbing the masts to check the sails and the rigging, to see the unveiled women on their terraces.

But it was the places of worship and holy relics that drew the Christian travellers from both east and west. It was to worship these relics that they put up with such hardship, the unhealthy air – the city stank from the stagnant water in the underground cisterns – the pirates at sea and the brigands on land, determined as they were to reach Alexandria. First and foremost, they wanted to see anything to do with Saint Catherine, the Alexandrian virgin who, according to tradition, was martyred for her Christian faith. And the conniving guides would say just about anything to attract the pilgrims. Parts of the ruined fortifications were described as the ruins of the royal palace where the Saint's father had lived. Other ruins became the jail where Catherine was imprisoned. Further on, two fallen marble columns were shown off as the pillars the Saint had been tied to and where she was tortured, and a marble billot which is still to be found within the Greek Orthodox Church of Saint

Saba, was worshipped reverently as the block upon which the wise maiden was beheaded. There was even a time when it was claimed that the marble block bore traces of her blood.

Saint Mark the Evangelist suffered much the same fate. According to legend, his body was secretly removed to Venice in the 9th century by Venetian merchants, so the only relic that remained in the city to be worshipped was an old worm-eaten pulpit in the Coptic Church of Saint Mark at Missala, from which, the faithful were assured, the Evangelist had preached the Word of Christ. And even that was lost at the end of the 17th century, as was an icon attributed to Luke the Evangelist.

We had almost reached Rosetta. On either side of the road there were large plantations of date palms that had taken root in the sand on the edge of the desert.

As we entered Rashid, Sorial announced, "Here we are."

We got out of the car. Our arrival had attracted quite a crowd of children. They ran to admire the vehicle, to stroke it, and those of them who knew a few words of English seized the opportunity to practice, calling out, 'Good morning', 'What's your name?' and 'From where are you?'

We wandered along the two main streets of the bazaar, packed at this time of day. We could sense that foreigners rarely came here by the curious way people looked at us. The men, young and old, turned their heads to watch us as we walked past. Everyone seemed to be particularly impressed by the way Cécile was dressed, in tight blue

jeans with a long blouse over the top, her hair tied back in a big blue scarf. The women gave her bewildered looks, then lowered their heads, abashed, and walked on.

When we paused to look at their wares, the shopkeepers attempted to sell us the most sundry array of things. One fat man with the deep voice of a deacon, approached Cécile holding out a plump hen, inviting her to see for herself how fat it was, while his helper picked two rabbits up by the ears, shaking them in her direction as if he were about to catapult them. We had to keep our eyes pierced and our wits about us, as the streets of the bazaar had no pavements or asphalt surface. They were full of mud with great, deep puddles in several places. You had to be quite deft at jumping from 'dry land' to 'dry land' and keeping out of the water.

"What a good job it's not raining," said Cécile, when she saw that her trousers were already splattered in mud up to the knees.

There were clucking hens and wriggling rabbits crowded into crates, being pulled out and pushed back in, like something in a magician's act. There were sprightly goats and pigs, unconcerned by the mud and the noise, grazing blissfully. And further on, there was fruit in great piles: everything the fertile earth of the Nile produced at this time of year was on display.

I was surprised by the large number of pigs, as Muslims are forbidden to eat pork, but then I remembered what Sorial had told us about pigs being sold to the Copts. "There

are a lot of Copts in Rashid," he had said, "They even have a church here."

At the corner of a side street stood the *assir assab* vendor. It was many years since I had last seen such a sight! On his cart he had set up a manual press for squeezing the juice out of the sugar cane. The cane was passed between the mangles of the machine again and again, like a snake, while the man turned a crank, and the sweet juice, as white as milk, trickled into a large glass jar.

Serial, seeing that we wanted to try it but had not the nerve, promised that on our way back to the Cecil we would stop off at a "good clean place" near Ramleh Station for a glass of *assir assab*.

We were about to walk on when a cheerful jangling sound announced the approach of the wandering *argisous* seller. Just then, from out of an alleyway opposite, came a tall Berber, thin and black as tar. He wore several wide leather belts that held the large urn containing the cool *argisous*, a drink that has the colour of tea and the flavour of liquorice. A young girl, whose face was uncovered but who wore a white headscarf, approached him for a drink. He selected one of the glasses, which he wore around his waist like cartridges on a gun-belt, and with well-synchronised movements of his arms and waist filled the glass with the aromatic drink. It frothed a little as he poured it into the glass from the strange, high, rhomboid tap of the copper urn.

In search of a little shade to rest a while, we went into a large mosque. Cécile stayed outside. Nobody forbade her entry, but as a woman, she felt uncomfortable going into

a place where there were only men. She sat down on one of the low marble walls to the left of the entrance, where she continued to watch the passers-by as they went about their business in the bazaar.

Even though, on paper at least, she was a Moslem, she had never been into a mosque, other than the visit we had made two days before to the Mosque of Nabi Danial. She and Prince Ali Toussoum had been married at a civil ceremony held at the Town Hall in Nice, but following that there had been a religious ceremony. An Imam had come to their villa from Marseilles and married them according to the Laws of the Koran. At that time she had taken another name, Nazli. Princess Nazli was her Moslem name, but Marie-Honorée Cécile remained Cécile to her husband and her friends.

She continued to attend the Catholic church on Sundays where she put things in order with her own God and with the parish priest, who showed the appropriate Christian understanding – although the Princess' generous donations to the Church's charitable funds had helped as well.

The mosque that we entered was a place of breathtaking beauty. The architect had used dozens of columns to support the numerous arches which held up the dome of the mosque. His ingenuity in using columns that came from earlier buildings had given the structure a singular elegance. They were all different in shape, width, height and in the type of stone they were made of, and had all originally been used during different periods. The interior was illuminated by the rays of the sun that stole through

countless tiny openings, selectively lighting up certain parts while leaving others peacefully rapt in darkness.

As we entered we took off our shoes and placed them with others in a row in a corner. We stepped upon an assortment of soft old rugs that completely covered the floor.

Sorial undertook once again to be our guide. In a low voice, almost a whisper, he showed us around the veritable forest of columns.

"You see this one, this rounded granite column with the elaborate capital, it's Roman, I'd say most probably Late Roman, like those two over there. And then those two marble columns, the narrower ones with different capitals, they must have come from Early Christian churches."

Some of the columns had bases and others were bare, as if growing out of the ground.

Many of the columns were Islamic – some having come from older mosques, some from other large buildings that had been destroyed. Some were hexagonal in shape, although most were rounded, some thick and strong, some thin and frail. When a column had fallen short, the architect had lengthened the arch of the arcade to sweep down and meet it. The result was exquisite, harmonious in its asymmetry.

There were few faithful in the mosque at this time of day. It was not prayer time. Some were squatting in small groups of four or five, talking quietly, others sat alone reflectively, their faces turned towards Mecca. The place gave off a sense of transcendental tranquillity.

"Even if a wild beast were to come in here," mused Traver, "It would find peace."

The three of us sat cross-legged on the floor in a corner, each lost in his own thoughts. But not for long, as Sorial soon reminded us that Cécile was waiting alone outside. And so, from the cool calm of the House of Allah, we found ourselves once more in the clutter and commotion of the tradesmen and the aggressive and ever increasing heat of the bazaar.

"We'll have another short walk," our Coptic friend announced, "To take a look at three or four 17th-century residences that have recently been restored. And then, before we leave, we'll visit the old governor's house that's been turned into a museum."

Indeed, the three-story houses, built with bare red, dark brown and ochre bricks, had the loveliest facade.

As we walked, Sorial kept finding something of interest to show us: here, a broken pillar placed protectively in the corner of a building out of the way of carelessly passing carts; there, a slab of grey marble from some ruined ancient structure being used as a doorstep or as a windowsill. Further on, part of a column capital that had been built in to the ornamentation of a public fountain. Nothing escaped his attention. As he commented upon each curiosity, he added historical facts, dates, events, anecdotes. And I wondered what would have become of us without our willing guide, and how much of all this I would include in my 'guidebook'. Yes, at the end of the book, I should have to include other sites on the outskirts of Alexandria.

I learned that Rashid was a Coptic word, something I had not known before. The town and Alexandria had for centuries been rival ports, and as Alexandria had declined during the Middle Ages, Rashid had thrived. When the ancient canal that joined the Nile to Alexandria had silted up and was no longer navigable, then all the trade to and from Cairo had ended up in Rashid.

At the end of the 18th century, Alexandria had degenerated into a village of just 5,000 inhabitants, whilst Rosetta had become home to 35,000 souls. It became the country's main port. The fact that somewhere near here there must have been an ancient city in Graeco-Roman times is witnessed by the quantity of ancient architectural elements that have been built into almost all of the more recent structures. You can see relics of the past strewn all over the area. And yet, as no archaeological digs have been carried out, the identity of this ancient city remains a matter of guesswork.

As we approached the museum in the old governor's house, Sorial told us about the discovery of the renowned 'Rosetta Stone', which had been found built into the walls of the nearby fort. He was quite moved as he explained that, thanks to the inscription on the stone in three languages – in hieroglyphics, in the ancient demotic script of the Egyptians and in Greek – Champollion had been able to break the 'code' of the language of the Pharaohs. He added proudly that the fact that some ancient Egyptian words – such as lion and knee, which appeared as symbols

in the inscription – are used in the Coptic language had assisted in the decipherment.

“We Copts are descendants of the ancient Egyptians from the time of the Pharaohs and, of course, very many Egyptian Moslems are Islamized Copts.

He said this quite simply, without intending any nationalistic conceit, as if merely wishing to state an historical fact.

We went into the museum, an impressive three-storey structure, faced with the characteristic local bricks. A thick granite column supported the stairwell of the building, breaking the monotony of the plain surface and adding charm to the façade.

Stone steps led us up from one level to the next, until finally we reached the third floor. Through the exhibits on show, we gained an impression of how the privileged of Rashid had lived at the height of the town's prosperity.

Sorial paused for breath. It seems the stairs had tired him. He explained that this had been where the governor's wives had lived. From high up here, a position that well suited their station, they could enjoy a panoramic view of the sea from the terrace. As this was the highest point in the town, they were in no danger of being seen by male eyes. And if they should wish to pass their time watching the comings and going of the passers-by on the main street, they could look out of the windows on the opposite side, protected from indiscreet onlookers by the delicately carved wooden *musharabieh*.

The previous day, Sorial had telephoned the Director of the museum to announce that he would be arriving with some overseas visitors. And so, the *Moudir* himself came out of his private sitting room on the third floor to greet us and to offer us refreshments.

After the tiring walk in the hot, humid breeze of the muddy alleyways of Rosetta, the cool of the women's quarters was most welcome. We were overcome by an oriental listlessness. We lounged upon the comfortable floor cushions as we sat cross-legged around the low *sofra*. The Director clapped his hands to hurry the two covered maids who served our tea.

"Allah is merciful," said Anwar Effendi, the museum director, as he sipped on his scalding hot, over-sweet tea, which was served in a small glass. "*Bel raha*," he added – take your time – there's no hurry – make yourselves at home. Any friend of Sorial Effendi's was a friend of his.

He was a bulky man, with a fleshy face made even more rounded by his cropped grey hair. A thick moustache punctuated the middle of his face like a black hyphen. As I watched him idly, I began to imagine him wearing a large, white turban, and I replaced his European-style clothes with a dark blue silk caftan with golden braid glittering on the hem of the sleeves. This is what the last governor who lived here must have looked like, as he sat, praising Allah for the great mercies He had rushed to bestow upon him on this Earth and lauding the Jewish customs officer who had so scrupulously filled his coffers with golden florins and louis, silver coins and ducats.

The breeze continued to blow through the open windows creating a welcome draught. Anwar Effendisoon exhausted the little English he knew in his words of welcome. He was an archaeologist belonging to the Islamic Monuments Service, and all that he had to tell us, he said in Arabic to Sorial, who translated it back to us in French and in English.

“This is the most comfortable, the coolest and the most beautiful place in the whole house. As you have seen, it has a large bathing room, and next to that is the Master’s rest room. The governors who lived here – may Allah keep them in the coolness of paradise – would come home tired by the worries, the responsibilities that came with their position. There were many rich merchants in Rashid. The feluccas sailed up and down the Nile loaded with merchandise. Merchants from the east and from the west thronged to carry the wealth of the Bountiful Allah. It was not just goods sailing down the Nile from Cairo that passed this way, but also those brought by the caravans from the Red Sea that arrived at this shore, transhipped from the lands of the Indies and even further afield. Spices, silk, timber, herbs and coral. They were carried as far as the Nile, and from there to Rosetta.

“As soon as the Master came up here, he was received by his wives. There might have been four of them, or five, or even more. His position and wealth afforded him this. The women would usher him into the bathing room, where his steaming *hammam* awaited. Afterwards, he would move to his couch in the ornate adjoining room, decorated with exquisite, hand-painted tiles. There he would be anointed

with oils and aromatic essences, and the younger of the wives would massage away the troubles of the day."

Cécile sat a little uncomfortably in this unusual position. The Moudir, recognising that one of his guests was 'of noble blood', showed the respect due to her station. You see, with the passage of time, the Egyptian revolutionary fervour had calmed somewhat, and to be visited by the wife of a prince, who had been so closely related to the late Farouk, was no small event. After all, four decades had passed since the events of '52...

Earlier, during Sorial's guided tour, when Cécile had heard about the governor's numerous wives, she had felt the need to emphasise the fact that Prince Ali had had only one wife... at least, from the moment that he married her this was true.

For his part, Sorial wished to stress that the role of the Egyptian woman has been misunderstood; that it is wrong to assume that life for a woman in the harem, or for a woman whose husband has taken more than one wife, was unbearable.

"You are looking at it from a western perspective, from a European viewpoint. It would be wrong," he continued, "To think of the Egyptian male in the last centuries as a heartless master, a harsh despot, indifferent to women, whose role it was to simply bear and rear children. Women were, and still are, at the very heart of a man's regard. Arab poets have written the most dazzling verse extolling the female charms and beauty. Before we leave Rosetta, I'd like to tell you a love story, the conclusion to which was written here, in this

very town, somewhere around the beginning of the 19th century.

“At the time, a terrible plague had broken out. ‘The Black Death’ was not unusual in the Middle Ages and the years that followed. Epidemics decimated the populations of Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa. Egypt was struck particularly hard by these epidemics. No sooner had the people declared ‘praise be to Allah’ because they had been spared, than they were hit by yet another outbreak.

“From 1701 to 1835, they were struck by this curse every 20 to 30 years, with staggering consequences. Of course, there were no cures in those days, the only measure the authorities could take was to immediately isolate all the afflicted and lock them up in guarded camps, where they died, helpless and abandoned.

“The poorer parts of the towns and the villages, which had no sanitary provisions whatsoever, were worst hit. But it didn't stop there. Often the khedivial palace was infected as well. And on this particular occasion, members of the personal entourage of Tousoun Pasha, the favoured son of the viceroy, Mohamed Ali, were affected. They were isolated immediately and herded off to the quarantine camp that had been set up in Rashid. There were so many who had fallen sick, among them a Circassian slave girl of rare beauty with whom the Prince had fallen head over heels in love. When he heard that his beloved had fallen ill, he did everything within his power to keep her near him. He wanted to care for her himself. He couldn't bear to think of their being separated; of his remaining in the safety of the

palace while she was taken away, all alone, to the slow death of the camp in Rashid.

“But in the face of the fear that had seized all people, the panic the appalling pestilence had provoked, it was impossible to differentiate between nobles and humble folk. Toussoun Pasha did not hesitate. When he realised that all attempts to save his beloved were in vain, he decided that he himself would go into quarantine with her. And so, despite the tears and entreaties of his mother and all of his kin, the prince entered the death camp with his loved one. As Count de Fortin, the French traveller who recorded this story, tells us, she died first, and a few days later, Toussoun followed her.”

Sorial translated the story to the Director, who listened with care, all the while holding his plastic fly swatter up in the air – for some time, a large horsefly had been buzzing annoyingly around. At the end of the story, he ruthlessly smacked the swatter down and obliterated the fly. He let out a relieved sigh and, looking at Sorial, said:

“The scoundrel, it was driving me crazy,” his eyes declaring that he himself would leave this world only when Allah so dictated, and not a moment sooner.

“My dear friends,” Sorial announced, holding out his hand gallantly to help Cécile to her feet, “We must be going. We have a long road ahead of us.”



THE BALD

SINGER'S
VI
DAY

THE BALD SINGER'S DAY

“How long it's been since I last came to the 'Athinaios'! It used to seem such a big place, enormous. Now I see it in its true dimensions, rather cramped, a bit on the small side for a dance hall. Although there may have been some changes made since then... Perhaps they've made it smaller?

“The time I remember the 'Athinaios' best was when my parents bought me my first pair of long trousers and they took me out for a 'dance afternoon' an *après-midi dansant*. I was so proud as I sat between my father and mother at one of the front tables, near to the dance floor. I felt certain that everyone was looking at me – I had obviously grown up so much, I was wearing long trousers, a white shirt with starched collar and cuffs and my very first tie. On top of that I wore a double-breasted jacket with a white handkerchief discreetly sticking out of the breast pocket. All the clothes were a little too big for me – my father had taken care to

buy the suit a couple of sizes larger than I needed so that it would be 'comfortable' because, as he said, children grow so fast. I remember that the starched collar was as stiff as cardboard, it cut into the skin of my throat and neck, so when we got home I had to put lashings of talc on it to soothe the stinging.

"How wonderful things were back then! When happiness was attainable, dependent upon such small, simple things. I must have been fourteen or fifteen at the time. The hall was full of people, but we had arrived early to be sure of a good table near to the dance floor. When the band began to play, I'd already eaten the ice cream my parents had ordered for me."

"Yes, I remember it as if it were yesterday, too," said Cécile. "They had a good band. I used to come with my parents as well – I was so young that my mother would keep warning me before we arrived, saying if I didn't behave myself she'd take me straight back home. I used to love watching the people dance. Back then, apart from the Tango, they used to dance the Swing, the Foxtrot – but older dances too – the Charleston, the Waltz. When I got a bit older and started to dance myself, we had the Blues, the Mambo, Rock and Roll, the Samba. Oh, what marvellous times!"

"A few years later, one Sunday," Cécile continued, "I almost fainted when a young man came to our table, bowed to my father, and with a most serious air, asked if he might be allowed to dance with me. My father nodded his approval and stood up so I could pass. I didn't want to

dance. I was so shy. I had never danced in a public place. The only steps I knew were the ones my Aunt Adèle, who had recently arrived from Paris, had taught me. But, as has so often happened in my life, although I wanted to refuse, I was too embarrassed, so I stood up. I must have been only five or six years younger than he was, but he seemed so grown-up to me – you know, when you're young, even a few years difference seems enormous – as I later found out, he was a neighbour of ours and his father, who was a doctor, knew my father. He was tall, smart, with jet-black hair parted in the centre, à la Valentino. His father was Egyptian, his mother Swedish, quite a beauty. He had inherited his green eyes from her. When he smiled, I don't know why, but he reminded me of fondants – his face was so sweet.

“We danced a Waltz. He was an excellent dancer. We whirled lightly around the floor, I felt as if I were flying. We didn't exchange a single word all the time we were dancing – but whenever the band paused between songs, he held my hand and looked at me with those sweet, shiny eyes as if to say: ‘We'll dance this dance, and the next, and the next.’ And then there was a break. All the lights came up. He took me back to our table, where he said, ‘*Merci mademoiselle,*’ and bowed to my parents. I was flustered, all of a flutter. The perspiration was trickling down my face. I had to ask my mother to take me outside for a little fresh air.”

So, the ‘Athinaios’ dance hall held a special memory for each of us, except for Miléna, who sat quietly, trying to

visualise what life must have been like in those days, when everything was more romantic, less stressful.

In his youth, Sorial too had spent time at 'Athineos'. These days, he would occasionally stop at one of the tables on the pavement outside to take his morning coffee. He recalled how, somewhere around the end of '43 or the beginning of '44, as the war was finally coming to an end, he had met a Scottish nurse here. She was in Alexandria with the British forces. Her name was Rosie. She was slim, with translucent skin, as if it were made of wax. She had thick, curly red hair and freckles. She looked rather like those portraits of sombre Renaissance noblewomen – except for the fact that Rosie smiled all the time. They used to call her 'Smiling Rosie'.

"I was in love with her," Sorial said, grinning as he slapped his palm against his forehead to show just how love-struck he had been. "I wanted to marry her. I used to write her poems. I cried when the war ended, because Rosie left. She left forever. We exchanged a few letters, then later it was just Christmas cards, and then nothing."

Traver vaguely remembered the 'Athinaios'. After October '42, following Rommel's retreat, Traver had come back to Alexandria from Palestine to complete his convalescence.

"As you can imagine," he quipped, "After three weeks with my knee in plaster, I was in no state for dancing. But I came here one evening with some other airmen, together with two Greek and two Jewish girls." He stroked his beard, shaking his head at the memory, a roguish smile on his face.

“How different everything is when you're young and at war! You go on leave, with just a few days to relax. You want your fill of everything that you've had to do without during operations: sleep, women, fun, drink. Yesterday, the day before that, last week – you'd lost comrades, friends. Those who fight together soon become friends. But you got away with it this time, you're still alive and you must have a good time before returning to the front. After all, this might be your last leave. But that doesn't concern you so very much. You don't even think about death as you stagger back to Kyria Adriani's boarding house with the dawn. The leave recharges your batteries, restocks your stores, fills up your tanks – OK – time to get back to the front.”

A strong wind was blowing, coming in from the sea to cool the city after the heat of the day. The wind always comes from the sea in Alexandria, hardly ever from the desert. That is why the 'Athinaios' and the other cafés on the front rarely put tables out on the Corniche, but usually on the other side, overlooking the square at Ramleh Station. We could appreciate the strength of the wind from the rattling of the windowpanes and the banging of the huge shutters on the northern side of the building.

Time passed. We had abandoned ourselves to our memories. Each of us related nostalgic anecdotes from the past. We paid little attention to the brave efforts of the middle-aged singer who was attempting to render the songs of Frank Sinatra and Nat King Cole in a Lebanese accent.

There was a break for the singer and the musicians to take a rest. Quite suddenly, from out of nowhere, a slightly-built old woman appeared. She walked up to the dance floor with short, sure steps; gracefully climbed up onto the stage where the band sat, and stood in front of the microphone. With a broad smile, she bowed. And in one swift movement which told of her experience, adjusted the microphone to suit her height.

The singer and the musicians, who were getting ready to start their programme again, looked baffled. They could not decide what to do about this intruder. Should they move her off the stage?

The old lady bowed again and tapped lightly on the microphone, almost caressing it, to check the sound. In French, she wished the audience a good evening. Audience? What audience? The place was almost empty. There can only have been about fifteen people in the hall, spread out over four or five tables.

She turned towards the band and with the confidence of the experienced artist, announced, "*Les feuilles mortes...*" Then, looking straight ahead at the vacant centre table, she made a low bow and, as if addressing an ethereal ghost that she alone could see, said in a flirtatious tone:

"This song is dedicated to His Excellency, the Consul General of France..."

The speechless band members failed to respond to her cue. She turned and at looked at them sternly: "*Allons, allons, Messieurs...* Let us begin."

Everyone in the room sat stock-still, knives and forks hovering in mid-air. The waiters stood frozen to the spot as if caught in a magic spell. I noticed Sorial nodding to the musicians. Then he made a discreet but eloquent movement of his hand, which clearly said: "Come on, lads – play. Do her this favour, and I'll make it worth your while."

Unwillingly at first, the musicians began to play the accompaniment to that great hit of the '50s, 'the Dead Leaves' – a song that has been sung by Juliette Greco, Édith Piaf and Yves Montand. Then the warm, melodious, slightly tremulous voice of the veteran singer began to echo around the room, scattering a thrill of emotion. We looked over at Sorial gratefully. Cécile thought that Sorial, who always paid such attention to detail, must have arranged for this singer from the past to perform for us. But, in a whisper, he explained that, although he knew the 'Belle Flora', as she had been known in her youth, he had not heard her sing for many years and had nothing whatsoever to do with this unexpected appearance.

Cécile softly sang along, accompanying Flora:

*'Je voudrais tant que tu te souviennes,
Des jours heureux où nous étions amis...'*

*'I so wish that you would remember,
The happy days when we were together,
Life was much more beautiful then....*

*But life parts those in love
Slowly, quietly and soundlessly
And the sea erases from the sand
The footprints of the lost lovers.*

*The dead leaves are swept up
Like memories and unfulfilled dreams.
You see, I have not forgotten
The song you used to sing to me...'*

When the song was over, Cécile was moved to tears.

"That was Ali's favourite song. He sang it many times with our friend, Yves Montand in the garden of *Le coq d'or* at St Paul de Vence. Oh, what wonderful memories it brings back..." She turned her face away towards the curtain, as if looking out of the window at the sea, to hide a tear that trickled down her cheek. But the sea was dark, distant, invisible, the late-night passers-by on the Corniche only suspecting the sound of her breath as the last waves rocked her gently to sleep.

The lights in the hall were dimmed. After their initial hesitation, the band found their rhythm. The next song – '*La Mer*', by Charles Trénet – Flora dedicated to the Admiral, who again only she could see, sitting next to the invisible Consul General.

"*Mon Amiral,*" she said, bowing.

This, too, was a sad song of the sea. It told of people leaving, never to return. Other songs followed – '*Milord*', '*Padam padam*', '*Sous le ciel de Paris*' – songs we all knew, songs we had all sung, songs that brought back a bygone era.

The whole room applauded enthusiastically at the end of each song and when Flora, drained, eventually thanked us with repeated bows, we all called out: "*Encore! Encore!*" And refused to allow her to stop.

Obviously pleased and touched, she placed her hands across her chest and sang once again the refrain of '*Les feuilles mortes*'. And then she stopped. She could sing no more. In a tired voice, she said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I bid you goodnight. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you for your love... you too, *Monsieur le Consul General*, and you *mon Amiral*, and all of you, dear, brave young men who fight for the honour of France. Until next time... *Bonne nuit* – and may we see victory."

She blew kisses with both hands to the few of us in the hall of today, as well as to the countless ghosts of the audience of yesteryear who gathered at the empty tables and called out "Bravo, Flora!", holding up their fingers in the V for Victory sign.

When she came down from the stage, Sorial stood up and went over to meet her. After a warm greeting, he invited her to join us at our table.

She remembered him and seemed moved as she came towards our table saying, "*Ah, monsieur Sorial...* it's been so long since I last saw you. How are you? Are you well? Oh, my goodness, it's dear Monsieur Sorial."

As Sorial introduced us all, I hurried to fetch a chair. Madame Flora took her seat. She was tired, breathless. She sat quietly for a moment, trying to catch her breath. A waiter brought a glass and poured her some wine from a bottle bearing the label '*Domaine Giannaclis*'. Imagine, I thought, Giannaclis left here so many years ago, and yet his wine still remains....

We had already finished our meal and were taking dessert, but Sorial insisted that Madame Flora should have something to eat. She politely refused.

"I eat very little in the evenings, perhaps some yoghurt and a slice of toast... but, just to keep you all company and to finish off my wine, perhaps I will take a bite of something."

They brought her some *mezzés*.

I watched her as she ate and talked with Sorial. She must have been over 70, but her face was still pretty. Despite the countless wrinkles, it was still bright, beautiful. Was it because of her twinkling blue eyes? The well-defined lips? She must have been a beauty in her youth.

I cursed the passage of time that so mercilessly works his devastation upon mankind and was almost prepared to agree with Faust, when Sorial began to praise Madame Flora who, he said, "during the war years had so uplifted the allied troops' morale with her songs".

"Yes," he continued, "La Belle Flora made her own contribution to the victory!"

A French *Vembo*¹, I thought.

"Ah!" the singer exclaimed, blushing a little. "I was young then, I could sing for hours. Ah! Messieurs, you should have seen the things that went on in those days... there was chaos outside, with bombs falling everywhere – but inside, we kept up the revelry. We used to turn out all the lights, draw the heavy curtains and burn a few candles. It was our very own resistance. We made fools out of Hitler and Mussolini.

¹Sofia Vembo was a famous Greek singer, who raised the morale of the Greek troops fighting in Albania and became a legend in her time.

"In those days, my voice used to drown out the roar of the cannons and the barking of the men of the Air Defence Corps who complained about the slightest crack of light that escaped from a window or a door – *'Taf el nour... taf el nour... Turn out that light!'*

"The lads used to drink even more then, and some would ask me to sing *'Lili Marlene'*. Others would ask for *'Yupee yaya'* or *'It's a long way to Tipperary'*, while the fighters for Free France wanted to hear the songs their fathers had sung in the bloody trenches of the First Great War, *'Je mettrais mon linge sur la ligne Siegfried'*...over and over again.

"Ah! The city was so wonderful then. Alexandria had never been merrier, more carefree than she was during those years. When the bombing stopped – there were nights when we had two and three bomb raids in a row – everyone in the night-club would sing along with me until dawn. Then, one by one, staggering a little, the lads would be on their way. Infantrymen, sailors, airmen. I would be one of the last to leave. The house I shared with a friend, a young Jewish girl, Yvette – may God forgive her sins, she died of pleurisy – was in Mazarita. I would walk slowly back down the Corniche. I always arranged it so that, as I arrived home, the sun would just be coming up on the Ramleh side. What a breathtaking sight! What beautiful colours! Every moment the sky would change – yellow, orange, red. Despite the war, the sun never changed his habits and began every day by calling out to me, *'Good morning Flora'*. As I walked home, I would pick up pieces of shrapnel lying in the street

from the shells of the anti-aircraft guns – tattered, shapeless pieces. Sometimes they were still hot.

“I used to say to myself ‘Praise God, we had a good time last night’ and then I’d go to bed. And I saw such sweet dreams, ah! Messieurs, dreams so sweet that I didn’t want to wake up, it seemed a shame to interrupt them. I haven’t had a pleasant dream since...

“Then the young lads left – the infantrymen went to the front, the sailors off to their ships, the airmen out on their missions. Sometimes they came back. Sometimes they were lost on the paths of war. Perhaps some of them were killed, perhaps... But I never received any bad news, so, to me, they were just away, and I waited for them to return. I’m still waiting...

“They used to write to me. So many letters. I keep them all in two big Biscuits Marie tins. I read them over and over... Monsieur Sorial, I’m sure you remember that dark beige paper we used to have back then – the sheets of paper were so small... everything was scarce – it looked like grocer’s wrapping paper, but thinner. And the envelopes were small too, yellowish, almost khaki coloured, like the soldiers’ uniforms. Ah! And all the letters were censored.”

She paused for breath. Drank a couple of sips of wine.

“You should see how many of them wrote that they wanted to marry me. I was young then, very young and pretty. And silly... ha!” she giggled, “But one fine day the war was over – all things come to an end – and not one of them married me...”

She said this looking at Cécile, and she began to laugh again, "No, none of them married me, but I'm not complaining... May God bless Maurice, my son. Whatever would have become of me without him?"

With these words, she became serious. I noticed that her face took on a sad expression as if she were about to weep.

Sorial nodded his head in an embarrassed way, while Flora – whose full name was Marie-Florence – opened her handbag and took out a tattered envelope.

We were all eager to see what she was going to show us.

"A letter from Maurice," she said with a smile as she shook the letter almost triumphantly at Sorial. "Yes, Monsieur Sorial, he writes to me from America. In a few days he is to give a recital in New York. You know," she went on, addressing me now, "My son is a famous pianist. He travels all over the world – Maurice Duhamel – I'm sure you've heard of him."

With great care, as if handling something precious, a cherished relic, she slowly took a folded sheet of paper out of the envelope. She unfolded it as if it were a priceless rare manuscript. She had difficulty controlling her fingers, which were deformed by arthritis. Smiling, she said, "This is his last letter."

She put on her glasses so that she could see better and looked carefully at the letter as if rereading a few lines. Then, emotionally, she refolded it and put it back into the envelope from which she now withdrew a black and white photograph. She handed it to Sorial asking him to show it to

the others at the table. She wanted us all to admire her son, this fine young man, Maurice.

As the faded photograph was passed around, Madame Flora remarked, "See what a good looking young man my Maurice is? Look at his eyes – do you see those eyes?"

The photograph showed a very handsome young man sitting at a grand piano, dressed in a tuxedo and bow tie. He looked a bit like Lorca in his early photographs, in the days when the Spanish poet was trying to make a better world. Shining hair with a perfect centre parting and sparkling eyes sprang from the yellowed paper. It was an old photograph, very old and very worn. The young man in the picture could not have been more than 22 – 25 at the most.

"Ah! My sweet," the singer sighed in a trembling voice, "He's so busy that he cannot write often. But I write to him every week. I write every Sunday after the service at Saint-Catherine's."

Her eyes filled up with tears and with unsteady hands, she replaced the photograph in the envelope. She took an embroidered handkerchief out of her handbag, wiped her eyes and sniffed.

"I know, I know... I shouldn't cry. I'm lucky to have such a child. But what can I do? The distance between us saddens me so," and more slowly, in a whisper, as if talking to herself now, she added, "You see, I have no one else in the whole world but Maurice. But he's a musician – what am I saying? He's a virtuoso – I cannot stand in the way of his career, can I?"

"The other day, I was talking with the Consul General, and he said to me – Madame Flora, you must go to Paris

to be near your son. He needs you and you too need his support. – Yes, the Consul General is right, but Maurice is not in Paris all the time, you know...Sometimes he is there, sometimes in Salzburg for the Mozart Festival, sometimes in New York to play at Carnegie Hall, sometimes in Vienna – there's nowhere he hasn't been, my goodness!

“And after all, it's not right for a mother to be with her son all the time... it's selfish, I know. We have to allow our children to grow up and find their own way... Oh là, là! I too must be on my way home. Look at the time! It's late.”

“Where are you living now?” Sorial asked her.

“In Attarine,” she replied with a sigh, as if a little ashamed to be living in a poor neighbourhood where only locals lived these days. She added, “You must remember the house – the okella opposite the German Convent School. I've been living there since 1950 – over 40 years. I'm used to it now, it's convenient and I can get around on foot – it's just a couple of minutes from the church, near to the market, not far from the cinemas and Ramleh Station. But what am I going on about, I'm sure I've exhausted you with my chatter. I really must be going.”

She wished us goodnight, her warm smile showing how much she had enjoyed talking to foreigners in her mother tongue. Ever gallant, Sorial accompanied her to the door. When he returned he said sadly:

“*Quelle triste histoire*. What a sad story,” and he shook his head solemnly.

There was a long silence. No one spoke, but it was obvious that we were all curious to know more about Marie-

Florence – Flora - who lived on her love for her son and the memories of her performing years.

"She still has a good voice," said Traver. "I don't remember ever hearing her sing when I was in Alexandria during the war, though." He looked to Sorial for confirmation.

"No, I don't remember her from that time either. She probably sang in night-clubs that only the troops frequented. The first time I heard her sing was after the war, but you know, her success didn't last long. Just like so many others whose fortunes were closely tied to the war, Flora's fame died when the war ended.

"She can't have been more than twenty years old then. That's when her son was born. Nobody ever knew who the father was, although various rumours were going around. Some said he was a French officer who had gone over to De Gaulle's forces of the 'Free French' and been executed by the Germans a few days before the liberation of Paris. Another story claimed Maurice to be the son of a Pasha, a member of the Royal Family, who was madly in love with Flora but didn't dare to marry her. The gossips also talked about a rich Greek cotton merchant, who, to avoid a scandal, because he was a married man, had given Flora enough money to bring her son up, provided the truth never came out.

"What the really malicious gossips said about Flora back then – I mean, nobody even remembers her these days, even I had thought she must have been dead by now – was that she didn't even know herself who the father of her child was.

“Wherever the actual truth may lie, the fact is that Flora brought the child up in an exemplary way. She sent him to St. Catherine's Junior School, which was near their home. And not to the non-paying classes for the children of those who hadn't the means to pay the school fees, either.

“Then he attended le Collège Saint-Marc, another Convent School where all the children of the rich folk studied – not just children of the well-to-do families of Egypt, but from all over Africa.

“How she managed it, God only knows. She had more or less stopped singing then, although she would perform at events held by the French or Italian communities. Then she started to take in sewing, that's how she got by, one way or another.

“Once, I saw her with her son at Pastroudis, they had stopped there for a cake before going to the Fouad cinema, where all the French films were shown.

“I remember that evening. It was a Sunday and I happened to have a ticket for the same showing at the Fouad – it was one of the most important films in the history of French film-making, *The Beauty and the Beast*, by Jean Cocteau. The ‘Beauty’ was played by Josette Day and the ‘Beast’ was Jean Marais.

“Maurice must have been about 15 at the time. He was already a good pianist, so good that his mother had made great sacrifices in order to buy him a piano. Something unheard of in those days – only the rich families could afford their own piano. They said he was taking private lessons from a well-known Hungarian professor... his name escapes me.

At the time, the earnestness of the boy made an impression on me. Later, I don't know how she managed it, Flora sent him on a scholarship to Paris to complete his studies. It seems he did very well. The photograph she showed us was taken at a recital that Maurice gave there. He was considered to be a child prodigy.

"Flora only had photographs of Maurice as a baby. The one she showed us is the only one she has of him as a teenager. He sent it to her together with the letter we saw – the only letter he ever wrote to his mother. How many years have passed since then! Let me see, it must be thirty. Today, if Maurice is still alive – because his mother has had no news of him since then – he must be around 50 or 55 years old.

"She's written him hundreds of letters and cards, but they're all returned undelivered. She keeps them all and continues to write. She sends her letters to Paris where they are stamped 'unknown at this address' and returned to Alexandria. In batches of fifty, she ties them up with a pale blue ribbon and places them in old biscuit and chocolate tins that she's collected over the years. They are kept next to the letters that the soldiers sent her during the war.

"I met her in the street one day a few years ago and she invited me up to her apartment for a cup of coffee. I used to go to Attarine often in those days to browse around the curiosity shops and second-hand bookstores... You could always find something interesting or unusual. Flora kept me there all afternoon talking about Maurice. It was impossible to follow the path of her tired, unbalanced mind. I couldn't

work out whether she was talking about the present or the past. Everything was mixed up in her mind, as if she had taken down the books of time that God has carefully placed in chronological order, had jumbled them all up and put them back in her own irrational sequence. And she had added her own stories too, things she had made up.

"I was shocked. I said to myself – the poor soul has lost her mind. And she, in her despair and immeasurable loneliness, wouldn't let me leave – she was so pleased to finally find someone to talk to, to tell of her pain. Someone she could talk to about Maurice.

"From this mixture of incoherent babble and logic – for there were moments when I felt that she was thinking clearly – I managed to piece the story together. It might be the truth, or only part of the truth. Or I may be totally wrong. From the time Maurice went to study in Paris, he wrote to his mother only once. That's the letter with the photograph that she reads and rereads and has been showing off to people for thirty years.

"That last letter – the only letter – is written in the tender words of a child who is devoted to his mother and feels deep gratitude for the years she spent bringing him up all alone, for making it possible for him to study. After that, silence. Nothing. The poor woman almost went crazy with worry. She wrote to him again and again, she sent telegrams, even wrote to a friend in Paris. Nothing.

"It was then that Flora took a monumental decision for a woman who had never even left that small triangle of

Alexandria, from Qait Bey to Pompey's Pillar and as far as the ancient Cape Lochias, and found herself facing the prospect of a journey to Paris. She would have to go alone by boat as far as Marseilles and from there by train to the City of Light. And where would she find the money? She'd given every penny she had scraped together to Maurice to cover the cost of his settling down in Paris.

"To pay for her passage on the 'S/S Aeolia' she sold three paintings that had belonged to her grandfather. Including the seascape with the waves breaking on the shore at sunset. She didn't want to part with it – she was used to it. She loved this sea. It had calmed her to look at it in the early mornings during the war years. She had fallen asleep day after day gazing at that picture as the first light of morning glinted through her shutters.

"But the paintings weren't enough, she had to sell the porcelain statuettes of two dancers and a gold cross that Reginald, an Irish sailor, had given her, and a silver cigarette case that bore the monogram of Tony Brown, a red-headed captain.

"She was resentful of the trifling sums she received for these belongings that, to her, were priceless, that carried with them the memories of generations. 'Madame,' the Lebanese second-hand dealer had said to her when noting her hesitation about selling a brooch that had been a present from her mother, 'I'm doing you a favour. Every day the Europeans who are leaving beg me to buy their trinkets, paintings and furniture. What can I do? I have nowhere to put them all. I've filled up my shop with junk,

and my attic and two basements. I haven't got any more cash.'

"And so, despite the insultingly low prices she was offered, poor Marie-Florence sold her brooch and everything else necessary to pay for the boat, the train, the hotel, and she hurried off to France. She locked up her house, as there was no one to look after it for her. Her mother had died recently and she had never known her father. But she had a pretty little cat, Minouche, which she left with an Armenian neighbour, a spinster, who promised to look after him.

"Flora described all this in the finest detail, up to her arrival in Paris. But from that moment on, things were confused. She became laconic, vague. Everything was mixed up in her mind. I don't know whether she did this intentionally, or whether she was just unable to accept the facts. It seems something happened, and Maurice refused to see her.

"What is the truth? Probably nobody knows besides Maurice and his mother. Why did he suddenly turn against her? One explanation is that he'd used up all the money she'd given him and neither continued his studies nor became a famous pianist. He was so ashamed when this was revealed, that he chose to disappear forever rather than face his mother.

"Another version is that he had found out somehow about Flora's past and the destruction of this icon of decency that he had created for himself, meant that he couldn't bear to see her again. He hated her because he had loved her so dearly. He'd been proud of her and now he was ashamed that she was his mother.

“What happened in Paris? Did they meet? Did Maurice refuse to see her at all? Nobody knows. But whatever happened, it shocked Flora so much that her hair began to fall out. As she brushed it, great clumps of the lovely black shiny hair she was so proud of came away. By the time she got back to Alexandria she was totally bald, unrecognisable. There was just thin a layer of fine down covering her head. She shut herself inside her apartment in Attarine and cried for ten whole days. Everything was going wrong for Flora. Her whole world, a world that she had built up with so much love and care, was falling apart.

“She asked herself why. She'd never done anyone any harm. She'd lived for the present throughout the war, spread joy with her songs, her youth, her beauty, without a thought for the future. No one told her that when wars end they leave maimed, crippled victims everywhere, not only on the battlefields.

“After the war, the child had come. The mocking smirks didn't bother her, the spiteful whispers, the questions full of innuendo. That child made her feel respectable, raised her up to the same level as the housewives who were blessed by fate, who were not struck down by a stray bullet.

“And Flora, who had scorned the sirens of the air-raids, who had kept on singing even on the night when a German plane missed its target and bombed Ibrahimeya – the part of Alexandria where the Greeks lived – rocking the whole city, now stood lost amongst the ruins of her destroyed hopes. Alone, wounded, bald.

"Fleetingly, she thought of ending her life, but she flinched from that hurried release. It's amazing just how much a person can endure. And Flora fought back. She told herself, 'It's just a summer storm, it'll pass. Be patient. It was bad timing – I should never have gone on that trip to Paris. You'll see – the day will come when Maurice will write. I'll see him again. I just have to hang on until then. When he comes back, he must find me standing on my own two feet.'

"Whenever she went out, she wore a silk scarf wrapped around her head like a turban to cover her baldness. Later, she bought a wig and went on with her life. She continued to sew, to hope, to live. Days passed like this, then months, then years – but nothing changed.

"Flora's letters to her son were returned one after the other. She stubbornly continued to write, and her letters continued to go undelivered. She began to talk about Maurice. She would tell her clients what a wonderful pianist he was, about the scholarship he had received to study in Paris. She showed off his photograph proudly. And as time passed, in his mother's fantasies, Maurice became famous, acclaimed in the musical capitals of the world. As the years passed, so she glorified his achievements."

" Ah, Hag Ahmed, I'm so lucky," Sorial had heard her say one day to the janitor, "What a wonderful son I have! He loves me so much, he takes such good care of me." And when the humble bawab dared to comment that Maurice might at least come to visit his mother, she was furious: "What on earth are you talking about, Hag Ahmed?"

Don't you realise what you're saying? My son is the famous pianist, Maurice Duhamel, who tours the capitals of Europe every season – and you expect him to come to this dreadful place? How could you imagine such a thing?"

Thoughtfully, Hag Ahmed nodded his head, as if wishing to say, "I can't understand such behaviour, but then, these Europeans don't think the same way as we do. Perhaps they're right."

Sorial continued, "And so, gradually, Flora built up her own little world. Resignedly waiting for the day when Maurice would write and invite her to come to Paris. He would even send her the ticket.

" 'Just imagine,' she said one day, 'If he should ask me to fly there. I've never been in an aeroplane. I'd be terrified. But when that blessed hour comes, I'll gladly climb even aboard a rocket, never mind a plane.'

"Flora is still waiting for the day to come when she'll see Maurice again, she still lives in hope. To her, hope is not something that you say – maybe it'll happen, maybe it won't. For her, hope is the expectation of something certain to happen, you just don't know exactly when. There's no doubt in her mind that she will see Maurice again.

"There's a battle going on in her unbalanced mind: time moves forward a little, but with the power of her love, Flora manages to halt the hands of the time-clock and force them back. She musters all her ingenuity to this fight - tonight's performance was just one of the many minor battles that the past has won over the present."

Sorial was quiet. He motioned to the waiter to bring the bill and took care to discreetly pass a tip to the musicians of the band.

"The poor woman," Cécile sighed, "How unfair life can be."

Traver, who had not said anything for a while, commented that, in his opinion, there is no consistency to man's actions. The theory that good deeds are rewarded while bad ones are punished is simply a ridiculous fairy-tale for children. A necessary invention to ensure some sort of equilibrium, a balance in this world.

"Life to me," he went on, continuing his train of thought, "Is a series of accidents, coincidences. It was by chance that Flora found herself orphaned and alone when the war broke out, that she had to cope without any support whatsoever in her hardest hour, when the world went adrift. If different events had occurred after the war, her fate might not have been the same. An intervening god is only to be found in ancient Greek tragedies. In real life, there is no divine intervention – if a bad man is punished it is quite by chance, by accident, just as it is by chance that a good deed is rewarded. Often, things work the other way around, in which case, man consoles himself with the thought that he will surely get his just reward in the next life. Myself, I think coincidences rule our lives, chance governs everything, not only on this earth but throughout the universe."

No one fully agreed with Traver, but at this late hour, no one wished to argue either.

Cécile felt that the Englishman's words were yet another confirmation of his atheism. But she was in no mood to go into this further. She was suddenly taken over by a nostalgic urge to walk around the streets of the old city.

We stepped outside into Ramleh Square and began to walk towards the Cecil. Before long, far off to the right we saw the illuminated fort of Qait Bey.

We continued to walk in silence, each deep in his own thoughts. When we came to the imposing Chamber of Commerce building, it seemed that no one felt like accompanying the princess on her midnight stroll.

Sourly, Traver announced that he was tired, that as oldest in the party it was his prerogative to go and rest, leaving me with the privilege of escorting Cécile.

Sorial said that he would gladly come with us as far as the corner of Nabi Danial and Fouad Street. Miléna, seeing that her aunt was not insisting upon her coming along, wished us goodnight and together with Bill, turned right to go back to the hotel.

We strolled down Nabi Danial Street. It must have been after one o'clock in the morning, but we did not feel like looking at our watches. We walked on contentedly. Occasionally a tired old taxi would drive by, even more occasionally the odd passer-by.

"*Bonne nuit*," Sorial said as we reached the junction of the two main streets of the ancient city, "Have a nice walk. I'll see you tomorrow, God willing."

Cécile and I continued west until we reached the point where Sharaa Fouad becomes Sidi Metwalli Street. Here,

we turned into the thick maze of back streets and began to amble aimlessly down the narrow muddy alleyways. Now and then, a rat that had escaped the attention of the lazy cats would scuttle by, startled by our footsteps.

Cécile wanted to see the house where she was born. But she was ambivalent. She had felt the need to go there since the first day she had arrived in Alexandria. She confessed that she had almost been on several occasions, but each time had turned back. She was intimidated by the throngs of people during the day, the crushing crowds on the narrow streets, the cars that caused such pandemonium with the never-ending honking of their horns. The pedestrians, manoeuvring themselves between the rackety old cars, defying death with the skill of daring toredors.

In the light of day, things looked more sordid, uninviting, whereas now, at night, by the light of the moon that gazed curiously down upon us, everything was wrapped in a mysterious half-light. The mud seemed a little less thick, the grimy walls less obvious, and the cool of the night lessened the stench that oozed from the okellas.

We had walked almost as far as the Italian Technical School of Dom Bosco, when Cécile stopped in front of a forlorn old okella. She took a few steps back to make sure that she was not mistaken, then crossed to the opposite side of the road so that she could see the whole building.

I stood silently next to her, looking in turn from Cécile's bewildered face to the deserted building. Over time, the plaster had peeled off the façade and in many spots the old stonework and bricks showed through like deep open

wounds. Two of the balconies had fallen down completely and the only shutters that remained hung at odd angles, as if about to fall off at any moment.

The front door of the okella, permanently open these days, gaped wide, the rusted hinges refusing to budge. The only signs that the seemingly abandoned building was still inhabited were the washing hanging out from the third floor, a rag rug draped from a second-floor window, and the restless scratching of a startled cockerel that watched us warily from the first-floor balcony.

Cécile pointed to a lopsided window next to the balcony where the cockerel held sway and said in a husky voice: "That was my room."

She took her gold cigarette case out of her handbag and lit up a Gauloise. After a while she sighed, "Good God, whatever have they done to our home!"

I explained to her something that we had already discussed: the rents were set by law many years ago and had been frozen for over half a century. As a result, the property owners, who received an absolute pittance in rents, were not prepared to do any maintenance work whatsoever. I reminded her of what Sorial's friend, Boutros Effendi, had told us one day while we were drinking coffee together: "The rents I collect every month from a three-storey building in Salah el Din just about cover the cost of a meal for two at the Delta Hotel..."

"That may be so," said Cécile in a whisper, "But I never expected to find it in such a squalid mess, so changed! Of course, even back then, our house was no palace –

nothing compared to the okellas on Fouad or Sherif Street, or the ones in the Quartier Grec. The people who lived around were just humble folk. European office clerks, most of them.

"My father, may God rest his soul, worked for the *Messageries Maritimes*. Next door to us lived a Jew named Abikzir with his family. He was a book-keeper and he had five daughters. Above us was Madame Spiteri, the Maltese seamstress, and her son, Freddie. On the other side, that gossipy Armenian woman... what was her name? Her husband used to make sausages and pastourma and he used to call her *yavroum* – my little treasure – all the time...

"One floor above us lived some Italians. The father was a printer, the mother a milliner, and they had a son named Ettore. Opposite them was the Greek teacher who married a Lebanese woman. They had six children. Oh my... How the years have passed! How much things have changed!"

Cécile stood there gazing at the dilapidated building, deformed by time and human negligence. She threw down her cigarette and lit another one, while ghosts of the past lurked all around in the smoky mist of the damp night. Cécile's grandmother, Yvonne, had arrived in Alexandria from France shortly after the bombardments of 1882 that followed the insurrection of Orabi. She used to talk to Cécile all the time about Marseilles. She had set sail from there on a huge ship with two tall funnels and colossal masts.

"Grand-maman, was the ship as big as this?" Cécile used to ask, pointing to pictures in books and magazines.

"No, no, my dear, it was much bigger than that," her grandmother would reply.

Cécile remembered, "We used to place a chair outside on the balcony for Grand-maman Yvonne. Every evening at twilight, she would sit out there with her arms resting on the iron railings and watch the people go by in the street below. The balcony has gone now."

The balcony had fallen down, but Grand-maman Yvonne was still sitting there, smiling down at Cécile: 'Come along,' she beckoned, 'Come here, little one and I'll tell you a story.'

In the shadows of the next window, it seemed to Cécile that she could make out the form of her mother, Marie-Celeste – always strict, always sad – and her father, whom she called 'Papi'. He never used to scold her. He was a quiet, melancholy type. In the evenings, he would sit smoking his pipe, reading *Le Progrès Égyptien*. For a moment, it seemed that Cécile could smell the aroma of his tobacco...

"Surely, it's not possible..." She cried, alarmed. But scents and smells hold memories too that lie ready to jump out at us with the ghosts of the past.

Then, as if the stones in the crackles of the old wall had given way she could see a cradle covered by a fine mosquito net. She thought she could hear a baby crying. The cradle creaked as her mother rocked it endlessly to and fro. But the baby kept on crying, coughing, choking. It was Cécile's unbaptised sister, Josiane, who had died as a baby from whooping cough.

At home they never spoke of Josiane. Her cradle remained there in the corner, made up and empty, right until the day they left Alexandria. There were things that Cécile had not understood back then that suddenly became clear to her now.

She saw once again the scene when the *roba vecchia*, the Shami rag-and-bone man, had come to buy the household contents when the family was preparing to leave for France.

"No, not that!" Cécile's mother had cried, "Not Josiane's cradle – we must take it with us."

"But, my darling," her father had said, "Where would we put it? It's so heavy. We just don't have space."

Marie-Celeste tried to convince him to change his mind.

"But it's just not possible, my dear..." He told her, "You know how limited the weight allowance on our luggage is. We've left so many things out – the picture frames, the books..."

Then Marie-Celeste began to weep. It was the first time Cécile had ever seen her mother cry.

"No, no," she wailed over and over again, "Not my baby's cradle, no, no!" and she collapsed on the couch.

"Don't do this," her husband coaxed gently, stroking her hair.

And he nodded to the bowlegged *roba vecchia* to take everything else, but to leave the metal cradle for now.

"We'll talk about it again tomorrow," he said gently.

The following day, logic prevailed. Logic – a cursed word that goes against our deepest feelings, choking them.

Marie-Celeste herself handed the cradle over to the rag-and-bone man, who complained that it was so heavy and would take up too much space in his storehouse.

She neither heard his grumbling nor noticed as the careless *fakino* scratched the door with the metal foot of the cradle as he carried it out. She began to stoically fold away the baby's diapers, socks and vests that she herself had knit many years before. She placed them all carefully into a large cardboard suitcase – together with a Bakelite rattle, a velvet bow, a silk ribbon and a red woollen bonnet.

How painful our memories become when we begin to stir them up.

Cécile started to cry. A single tear at first appeared at the corner of her eyes. She tried to hide it by putting a hand over her face. Then she turned her face away so that I should not see her weep. But a ray of light – was it from the moon or from the old street-lamp – gave her away. She began to sob, allowing the tears that she had been holding back for days to flow freely.

Sensing that it was impossible to hide any longer, she turned towards me, crying like a child. Dishevelled from her encounter with the past, with the memories that, like spiteful Furies sprang out from all around, her face was like that of a little girl. Our eyes met, and in a tremulous voice she stuttered:

“Why didn't I leave my memories in peace? Why didn't I leave them where they were in that velvet-lined drawer of the past? Why did I have to insist on looking back?”

Still crying, she laid her head on my shoulder.

I myself had battled with the same ghosts of lost dreams, with the memories of my childhood years that lay in wait on the street corners, in the shadowy recesses of stairwells which I had once climbed with the parents and friends that were no more. They stalked the schoolyards, haunted the glass fronts of the cinemas and the halls of the pâtisseries. They tapped me lightly on the shoulder in search of that which was gone. Here, they whispered, here was Carnezi's bookstore. Look, there was Dafoti's. Grigori's barbershop was opposite, no, over there, the shop further along – it's unrecognisable now – it sells transistor radios and alarm clocks.

Cécile's tears had soaked my jacket and I could feel her hot breath seeping through to my chest. How long did we stand like that? A minute? Two... Or was it forty long years?

An old man dragging a shabby, rickety pram loaded down with used cardboard and battered boxes he had gathered from the rubbish, brought us back to the present. He did not even glance at us as he passed with lowered head, like a walking scarecrow. And without a word, hand in hand, Cécile and I walked unhurriedly back to the hotel.

Now that we were united by the city's past, it seemed natural to sit together on the armchairs of Cécile's small

forth-floor balcony overlooking the sea. Everything was in darkness. Even the lights of Qait Bey had gone out.

The ghosts of Attarine surrounded us for a while, like bats flapping their wings insanely, conspiring to scare us, to bring us closer together. Then they left, satisfied.

The sea had long since fallen asleep, while to the west the lighthouse of the *Eunostos* continued to pierce the darkness with its three flashing beams of light.

"If the light bothers you," Cécile murmured, "Close your eyes. If you can still feel the flashes of light through closed eyes, we can go inside. It will be daylight soon."

THE LAST DAY

VII

THE LAST DAY

The biggest bazaar in Alexandria, the Midan, or the Midani, as the Greeks call it, is situated a little to the west of Mohammed Ali Square. There you can find all the fruits of the land of the Nile, as well as various delicacies imported from lands near and far.

You can buy any kind of meat (except for pork, of course,) and poultry – some hanging on hooks, others still cackling in their pens. Fresh and salted fish, shrimps, crayfish and every variety of shellfish. Pulses in great sacks, vegetables and fruit in crates or piled high on carts, as well as sugary sweets and spices, all plentiful and at reasonable prices.

I had not intended to go to the Midan. I wanted to visit Kom el Nadoura, the hill that for centuries had been home to the semaphore post of the ports of Alexandria. For at least 500 years it was forbidden for anyone to visit this military position. It had only recently become accessible to the public.

Cécile wanted to go to the market. Traver had arranged with Sorial to view the antiquities on the banks of Lake Mareotis. Miléna had expressed a desire to visit the district of Moharrem Bey where, during the Second World War, Durrell had lived, and afterwards to see Cavafy's house in the centre of the town. She also wanted to visit the seaside suburb of Cleopatra where the most beautiful of Fausta Cialente's Alexandrian short stories, '*Cortile a Cleopatra*', is set. Hosni, ever willing, offered to accompany her.

And so Cécile and I agreed that we would visit the bazaar together and then go on to Kom el Nadoura, the last of the hills remaining in Alexandria since Kom el Dik had been levelled.

"The view from there must be spectacular," she said.

In the decrepit taxi that gaspingly carried us to the Midan, Cécile explained that she wanted to see the market because her mother had once taken her there as a child.

"I must have been very young – I can't remember anything about it other than the heady aroma of spices. Ever since then, whenever I smell cumin, pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, I think of the bazaar in Alexandria, even if the smell of the place is all I can recall."

I must admit that I did not remember ever having been to the Midan. My mother used to say it was unsafe for Europeans, a place to be avoided if possible. Besides, it bordered on the rue des Sœurs, the notorious Sabaa Banat, the very name of which made my aunts blush bright red.

The taxi we chanced to take was in a terrible condition. The driver had covered the holes in the backseat upholstery

with a greasy rag-rug from which we were viciously attacked by a throng of bloodthirsty fleas that had made it their home. We got out of the taxi with swollen ankles.

"Oh my goodness," cried Cécile anxiously, "I hope that they were fleas and not lice," and she laughingly told me how she had caught lice the very first day that she had attended the Convent School.

"For two or three days they tried everything. My mother and my grandmother combed my hair with a hard wooden tooth-comb after systematically spraying my head with DDT powder. But in vain. The lice resisted in their fight for survival. They got rid of some of them, but others remained. Then they washed my hair with soap that smelled like sulphur. Nothing, no result. Then my father decided that it was time for the ultimate solution – he took me to the local Greek barber, *kyr-Thodoro*, who cropped all my hair off.

"*Ah, mes belles boucles!*" Cécile exclaimed, holding her hands protectively over her hair as if afraid that the drama would be repeated.

I tried to reassure her, judging from the bites on my ankles, that these were, in fact, only fleas.

The sun was rising. It was a beautiful day, summery, even though a cooling breeze blew in from the Eastern port now and again.

The market was crowded and noisy. We wandered around trying to find the herbs and spices. But no pleasant aromas reached us. A strong odour told us that we were close to the fish market. The reeking fish and stale shellfish,

exposed as they were to the sun, gave off a repulsive stench.

Luckily, the ordeal did not last long. We turned a corner and found ourselves in narrow alleyways packed with poultry. There was a strong smell here too from the chicken-coops, mixed with the crazy clucking of their feathery captives.

A little mystified, Cécile realised that the fleas had stopped biting.

"Have they abandoned us, or am I just not feeling them any more?" she asked.

"We'll see," I said, " They may have preferred the hens."

I urged her to walk faster so that we could escape the stifling atmosphere of the chicken-coops.

The refreshing sight of fruit soon reassured us. All kinds of fruit! We walked on, carefully avoiding the watermelons and melons piled up on the ground like green and yellow pyramids. The shoppers checked the prices, feeling the fruit for the best quality, slapping on watermelons to judge by the sound whether they were ripe or not. They squeezed oranges to check their juiciness. The apples were good too, and the pears. They sniffed at mangoes to confirm their flavour and pinched their tops. We had come to a jumbled crossroads that formed a sort of square. There was fruit here too, and vegetables – potatoes, onions, garlic, whatever took root in the fertile Nile Delta. Heaped up was just about anything that would fit inside a sack, a wicker basket, a hamper, a crate or could be loaded upon a cart.

We paused there, like bloodhounds, our noses in the air trying to sniff out the spices, the seasonings, the herbs. They came to us, vaguely at first, then more clearly and distinctly as we got closer – the aroma of cinnamon, of cumin, mixed with that of *kosbara*, of pepper – black, green, red – of *shata*, of dried anise, oregano, sesame seeds and thousands of other seasonings to enrich the food on the tables of wealthy and poor alike. All things that so pleasantly titillate the senses enrich the flavour of the *foul* pie with *tahini*, make the *fellafel* more digestible, spice a plate of *moloheya*. While cinnamon and cloves go well with *salep*, rice pudding and the countless delicacies born of the boundless ingenuity of Oriental sweet making.

In this part of the market there were not only edible goods but others too, with strange smells that sprang out from right and left like exotic elves, thrusting themselves upon us. Camphor from China, naphthalene from Turkey, local fish-glue, hemp ropes and spools of string from the Indies and wickerwork items from Upper Egypt.

A little further on you could see traditional Egyptian cosmetics: *kohl*, exactly like that used to enlarge and beautify the eyes in the time of the Pharaohs, *henna* to colour the hair, to strengthen it, to protect it from lice and which, in the villages, was also used to colour the palms of the women's hands and the soles of their feet. All kinds of perfumes, patchouli, brilliantine, powders and paints, together with wonderfully scented soaps – in all shapes and colours.

Cécile was delighted by this variety of aromas that mingled with those of incense and the smoke from the *shisha*, the traditional water pipes. She revelled in them in a way that was almost erotic.

At some point, imperceptibly at first, we became aware of the smell of smoke. Yes, something was burning. The smell of scorched wood soon became predominant, drowning out all others. As we turned back, we saw smoke. Along with all the other market-goers, we moved towards the little square that we had just passed through. Everyone was crowding towards it. Elderly Arab women in black *melayia* – there were not many of them; it was as if they had walked out of the engravings from another age – women in multicoloured housedresses, their heads wrapped in *hegab*, the equivalent of the Persian *chador*. Little girls with tightly plaited hair ran around, curious to find out what was going on. There were less hasty young men, dressed in *gallabeyas* or in European dress, who also moved towards to fire. The older people were more phlegmatic, hanging back and looking in the direction of the blaze, pointing towards it with their walking sticks.

Yes, it was a fire. On the far side of the square, a shop was ablaze and already the awning outside had spread the flames to the adjoining stall. Men were filling buckets with water from a tap in the street, while others with straw brooms tried to beat back the flames that teasingly defied them. The whole place was filled with a spreading thick, black smoke that billowed above the flames.

People were running this way and that, creating incomprehensible and unnecessary chaos, while a sole and pitiful *shawish* stood hopelessly in the middle of the square giving out confused orders that nobody took any notice of.

Soon, from a distance but getting closer, came the howling siren of an approaching fire engine. Somewhere not far off, the vehicle must have come to a halt, because the desperate wailing of the siren continued monotonously, while the rising smoke blinked red from the glow of the flashing light atop the trapped fire engine. But it was impossible for the hoses to reach the square. The fire was spreading – two, three, four shops were in flames now and soon the whole alleyway was ablaze. Two firemen arrived on the scene and began to harangue the poor policeman, accusing him of not having sooner emptied the street of the carts and piles of watermelons that presented an impassable barrier.

How would the huge fire engine get through? The fire was spreading fast. An officer of the fire brigade arrived. He calmly announced to the frenzied storekeepers huddled in the square that he could offer them no assistance whatsoever and that the fire engine would leave if the wares that blocked the way were not cleared away immediately.

And a miracle happened! A previously unbelievable and seemingly impossible order was instantly restored.

Without any guidance from anyone – the firemen had moved to one side and the useless policeman was

declaring that he rued the day his mother had brought him into this world – everyone, young and old, as if taking part in some sort of organised game, formed a human chain. The heavy watermelons and the bulbous melons were passed from hand to hand. In the rush, a watermelon was dropped and splattered on the ground, then a melon, but nobody cared about the waste, and almost before we had realised what was happening, the heaps of fruit blocking the road had disappeared. The square looked like a bomb site with the juice of splattered watermelons and melons running everywhere, while thirsty hens, hesitantly at first, and then more boldly, rushed around, revelling in their fleeting freedom and the tasty flesh of the ripe fruit strewn around. Here and there, a startled scorched rat scuttled unnoticed out of a burning shop.

Eventually, the fire engine managed to reach the small square. It took up its position. The hoses were uncoiled and the firemen began to extinguish the blaze.

“It’s over,” Cécile sighed, relieved. A gaggle of little local children had gathered around her. Now that the excitement of the fire was over, they had turned their attention to the blonde foreign lady.

“Let’s go. Let’s go to Kom el Nadoura,” she said, “I’ve had enough of the Midan.”

One thing that works exceptionally well in Alexandria is the taxis. Wherever you are, you can always find a taxi for hire. And they are extremely cheap. Most of them are battered, rickety old bangers. You never see a new taxi anywhere, and you will never come across a taximeter that

actually works. And yet all the taxis do have taximeters, ancient instruments which would make worthy exhibitions in a taxi museum, if there were such a place.

There are two rules to follow when taking a taxi in Alexandria. First: never take a taxi that is parked in front of a hotel. If you make this mistake, you will be charged many times the normal fare. Second: when you get to your destination, do not ask how much you owe the driver. Should you say “*kaam?*” – that is, “how much?” – then the driver will reply saying, “As much as you like,” and when his confused passenger tries to hand over the amount he considers to be fair, the driver will begin to haggle. Having realised that he is dealing with someone ignorant of the local ways, he will try to take him for all he can get. As you get out of the taxi, you should hand your money to the driver with confidence, as if you had made this journey a million times: two pounds for short trips – for example, from Ramleh Station to Attarine, four for longer distances, such as from Chatby to Qait Bey.

In just a few short minutes, we arrived at Kom el Nadoura. Fortunately, the taxi was not flea-infested this time.

It was a neighbourhood of rundown, poverty-stricken houses. Some had been demolished, others were just dilapidated, all were ugly. The hill rose enticingly behind them in the mid-day heat. We began to climb the broad path formed by steps made from huge black stones leading to the entrance to the semaphore post.

It seems that attempts had been made to beautify the slopes of the hill. Unwatered flowerbeds of parched

geraniums and shrubs waited patiently for their thirst to be quenched. A few granite columns lay lazily scattered around, indifferent to the scorching sun.

Unused to such climbs and having trouble tackling the huge stone steps, Cécile chose to rest a while. She looked around and sighed breathlessly, "Who knows what glorious buildings these columns must once have adorned; what illustrious days these marble bases must have known. How did fate bring them to be lying around like this?"

Out of breath, we reached the crest of the hill that had been created in Islamic times from the debris of the Great City. Beside us was a sickly fig tree, stubbornly rooted to one side of the slope, looking out over the *Eunostos* as if wondering how on earth it had managed to find itself so high up. We stood in a clearing left by the buildings and looked down at the old grey cranes in the commercial port, like great prehistoric birds, motionless in their midday rest.

Cécile, tired from lack of sleep the previous night, commented how wonderful a short nap in her air-conditioned room at the Cecil would be right now. The suggestion sounded like an invitation, and yet it conflicted with the promise of the unique view that awaited us should we climb to the roof of the high hexagonal tower.

We looked up to the top of the tower. The arms of the semaphore signals hung uselessly down now, like those of a terrible mythical dragon. A few clouds, carried along by the southerly breeze, were passing overhead, making it seem that the tower itself was moving. Cécile felt dizzy and leant against me for a moment.

"I don't know if I can manage all those steps, but I'll try. We'll see how far we get."

She said this as if she wanted to do it as a special favour to me.

We walked towards the entrance of the tower. It looked like a lighthouse. We passed in front of a tired old date palm, bent over as if struggling to avoid the steep drop at the edge of which fate had placed it. We tried the door to the tower and it opened soundlessly. We began, slowly, to climb the staircase which coiled upwards as if leading to the clouds.

It was just as well that the building was modern - that is, it had been erected at the beginning of the 20th century - and the wooden stairs were solid and sound. But there were so many of them, the climb was endless.

"Oh, my God," cried Cécile, as we reached the first gallery, "I never dreamt that I would ever find myself higher than Pompey's Pillar."

Indeed, we were way above the towering column of Diocletian, the tallest monolith column in the world, which despite all attempts to topple it, stood ever proud, unsleeping guardian of the ruins of the *Serapeum*.

I made the point that the destruction of the religious centre of ancient Rhakotis, which predated the city of Alexandria, was the work of the zealots of the new faith, adding that their ardent hatred of the ancient idols had brought about the destruction of some of the most splendid Alexandrian buildings.

Cécile replied that, much as we may miss these relics today, the extinction of idolatry was necessary at the time, otherwise, Christianity could not have taken root.

I did not think this was the right time to disagree with her. Cécile brought the subject to an end, saying, "Religious wars are always the cruellest."

I certainly agreed with that, reflecting that the works of the Crusaders, the barbarity of the Conquistadors, the Spanish Inquisition, but much closer to home, the bloodshed in Northern Ireland, are just tiny examples of how far Christians stray from the teachings of Christ.

From our vantage point atop the 'Acropolis of Alexandria' with its monuments of the *Serapeum*, we could see the Mahmoudeya, the canal that Mohammed Ali had reopened to carry the waters of the Nile to Alexandria, just as it had in ancient times. And beyond, Lake Mareotis, so beautiful from this distance. And after that, the desert stretching out to the south, boundless, vast, extending further than the eye could see.

The Old City spreads out to the east. The cosmopolitan Alexandria of the past one and a half centuries, listlessly, lazily perseveres. Way in the distance, the menacing suburbs of Ramleh rise up, their monstrous skyscrapers, so painful to the eye, reaching all the way to Abukir.

The magnificent Corniche, of such charming and unrivalled beauty when it was lined by buildings of human proportions, now groans beneath the weight of concrete imposed upon it in the 1970s and '80s.

We continued to wander around the roof of the circular tower like the hands of a clock. We looked to the north. To our left lay the Eastern port, while to our right we could see the tip of the fortress of Qait Bey, even more beautiful from this height. Farther to the west were the traditional boatyards of Anfoushi, the Palace of Ras el Tin – the Cape of Figs.

“Where are the figs trees that gave the headland its name?” Cécile asked, and without waiting for a reply declared, “I’ve had enough. I’m tired. Let’s go down.”

We left the lofty tower of the abandoned semaphore post and climbed down to the flatter land that tops the hill. We sat on a shady low wall surrounding the courtyard of a small house that stood, like a miniature old villa, on the edge of a steep drop. It must have been built a long time ago, perhaps at the end of the 19th century, as the home to some European overseer of the place.

Was it built for an Englishman or perhaps for an Italian? For whomever it had been built, the house, like all the other buildings, was abandoned now.

I tried to imagine what the desolate garden might have looked like when the house was first built. I saw it in my mind’s eye, well cared for, the plants tenderly watered, carefully pruned, proudly admired when in bloom. The residents of the small house looked down at the open sea, they made dreams. Now the place was deserted, running wild in lonely, serene desolation.

In my imagination, I began to put the plant pots back along the top of the low stone wall. I set some to the left,

others to the right, decorating the steps leading up to the front door. I used the same flowerpots that were now lying around, broken, smashed, trodden under foot. I refilled them with earth, decked them with red and white sweet-smelling carnations, like those in my childhood memories. In another part of the garden, I placed haughty hibiscus, yellow and white daisies and fluffy marigolds. While the flowerpots welcomed the visitor, in the corner of a small parterre I planted jasmine and, opposite, honeysuckle to scent the garden at night.

Before returning to the harsh reality of the present, I flicked through the yellowed pages of my old schoolbooks and found dried pansies pressed between them. I breathed, only for a minute, life back into them, set them nicely in a sunny clearing where they would not be in the shade. Pansies cannot get too much sun. And then, in the blinking of an eye – or was it Cécile's breath as she sat beside me? – the vision was gone.

Bringing back memories of the past hurt, I whispered, looking at Cécile, who had been quietly watching as I meandered through my daydream.

And she, as if wishing to add to this, let out a sigh and looked away, towards the grey city. Almost to herself, she said:

“Since the first day I came back to Alexandria, I have been asking myself why I keep raking up the memories of the past. Why don't I just stay comfortably in the present and whatever it still has left to offer me? Why do I keep opening and closing doors when I don't know where they

lead? Doors which for years were closed fast. Alas, the creaking of these doors is just as painful when they open as when they close."

It seemed that Cécile was also trapped in a memory game. As if continuing a conversation started long ago, she began to tell me about what had happened to her the previous day.

"It was a superb day, full of deep emotions. The most painful day I have known in years, but then, there were also such incredible moments of happiness; I experienced feelings which I thought had been lost forever. It was a day when I was completely possessed by a past that tightly embraced the present. Ultimately, it set me free from the ghosts I had never dared to look in the face before."

She paused, smiled, glanced at me briefly and continued.

"When I got to Alexandria, I had the strongest urge to see our house again. Even if only to pass outside. A person, who has not lived for years far from the place where he was born, cannot understand what it means to long to retrace the steps of his childhood. You don't know the pain of being uprooted. I didn't dare to go alone, but I didn't want to ask anyone to come with me. I was afraid.

"If things hadn't turned out the way they did at the Athinaios, if that poor French singer had not appeared, if Sorial hadn't told us her tragic story, if we had not found ourselves alone together in the narrow alleyways of Attarine, then I would never have revisited the house where I was born and brought up. I wouldn't have had the courage.

And I would surely have regretted it. 'We tend to regret not so much the things we have done, but the things we could have done and didn't.' I don't remember who said that, but he was surely right.

"It's all this city's fault. It allows memories to jump out from all around. Dear Alexandria.

"But apart from our house, there was also a person from the past I wanted to see."

Cécile searched in her bag for a cigarette, lit it, inhaled deeply and savoured the first taste. She went on, "Marco – a boy from our neighbourhood who never dared to speak to me. He must have been three or four years older than me. His mother was Italian and his father was a Copt. I can see him now – tall, slim, a little awkward in his movements, with thick dark hair and huge black eyes, long lashes and large, close-set eyebrows that formed two strong arches like in the Fayoum portraits.

"One day, in Zurich, many years after I had left Alexandria, when I was already married, I saw a Fayoum portrait hanging in an antique shop. The boy in the painting bore an uncanny resemblance to Marco. I don't know why, but I started to cry. Without seeking an explanation, Ali asked if I liked the painting, if I wanted him to buy it for me. I nodded, and, as usual, he bought it without haggling over the price. It was a very expensive gift.

"That day, some ten years after I had first arrived in France, I fell in love with Marco, Marco who I hadn't seen for years, Marco with whom I had never exchanged a single word. I hung the Fayoum portrait in a corner of

my bedroom in our house on the Côte d'Azur, next to an icon of Saint Catherine, an etching of an ancient view of Alexandria, and an exquisite stone *Romane* Virgin serenely holding the baby Jesus in her arms.

"You see, Ali didn't mind that I had hung an ebony cross above my bed and devoted a corner of my room to symbols of my Christian faith.

"But the presence of the portrait that I so closely associated with Marco, made me feel guilty. Sometimes, I felt as if I were being unfaithful to the husband who was so good to me. I would argue with my conscience – You should be ashamed of yourself – I would say – thinking of another man when Ali so generously gives you whatever your heart desires.

"But I couldn't resist. I kept thinking about Marco – quiet, a little sad, unsure of himself – waiting outside the school gates and following me home without saying a word. He wrote two little poems and sent them to me with Mafalda, my Italian classmate. If we hadn't left Alexandria, if there had been more time, surely we would have got to know one another. But fate decided otherwise, and we were separated before we had even spoken. Years passed and I moved farther away from Alexandria. I avoided telling people I was born there; I wanted them to think that I was pure French. Occasionally, I thought of Marco; of what might have been?

"For several years I corresponded with Mafalda. Sometimes she wrote to me about Marco. She said he had left for Paris to study medicine. After his graduation, he

returned to practice in Alexandria. He worked as a general practitioner in the Egyptian hospital, Mouassad. Later, his father opened up a clinic for him in Sherif Street. And then Mafalda herself left Alexandria and I never heard any more news.

“As the years went by, I thought more and more about the city where I spent my childhood – and about Marco.

“Years passed, many things around me changed, but the Alexandria that kept me company at night remained unchanged, as did Marco, who continued to gaze down at me from the bedroom wall through the huge, melancholy eyes of the youth in the Fayoum portrait. Sometimes, as I was falling asleep, he would slide out of his frame and creep into my dreams. Then I would awake feeling wonderful, the imprint of Marco’s body still visible on the rumpled sheets.

“There were times when I felt that Marco was the only thing left that was still completely my own. He was my Dorian Grey, immune to time and life’s ravages.

“Ali and I kept saying that we’d travel to Alexandria, but we kept putting it off and I was satisfied to live with the dream...

“Then the Prince fell ill. He was unwell for many years. I lost him just a few months ago. He was very old, over ninety. I felt very alone, alone and frightened in the bustling Riviera, alone in Paris too. In those places loneliness is even more cruel. ‘Don’t feel like that, my girl,’ our good friend, Stocks, would console me, ‘Ali spent many happy years with you. He lived a long life. May we all be so lucky. You’re young, you must start a new life for yourself.’

“After a few months, I decided to make the trip to Alexandria.

“I told myself: It's now or never. It wasn't hard to convince Miléna to come with me. She'd already fallen in love with Alexandria in a platonic sort of way, without ever having seen the city. She knew it from the writings of Forster, Durrell, Cialente, Mahfouz, the poetry of Cavafy.

“I planned this homecoming with such enthusiasm! I was thrilled when they told me that the Cecil Hotel was open again. And Sorial, bless him, has been so good to us since day one. He was a friend of Ali's. He used to stay with us sometimes in the summer at our house in Brittany.

“I asked Sorial discreetly about Marco and he told me that he still runs his clinic in Sherif Street. Yesterday morning, I made up my mind. I asked Sorial to phone and arrange an appointment for me. I pretended to have a tummy upset. ‘It must have been the sugarcane juice you drank yesterday,’ he said disapprovingly.

“I was very nervous on the way to the clinic, as if I were going on my first date. As I waited my turn in the gloom of the tiny waiting room, my heart was all a-flutter. I was so agitated that my stomach really did begin to hurt. I looked around for something to distract my attention, to relieve my unease. There was an enormous gravure hanging on the wall. The frame was exceptional, and impressively carved. I got up to take a closer look, to read the inscription underneath. It depicted a scene from Molière's ‘Le Malade Imaginaire’.

“And then, the doctor opened the door. It was my turn to go in.

“Oh my goodness! And as if by magic, the moment I saw Marco, the image of the beautiful young man I had cherished for so long faded away completely. Before me, seated in an old leather chair behind an imposing desk, Dr. Marco Khouri smiled good-naturedly at me. An elderly gentleman in a white coat, looking out from behind thick spectacles with a slightly confused expression.

“The curly hair was gone. Wherever baldness failed to completely cover his wrinkled head, there remained just a few wisps of snow-white hair. The huge black eyes that I had craved for so many years were still there behind the lenses of his glasses, but they were surrounded by dark rings and heavy, sickly-looking bags hanging beneath them like those you see on night-owl oriental gamblers in the casinos.

“I felt a desperate need to escape. It was like a panic attack. I simply wanted to run away.

“In a voice husky from the cigarettes that had yellowed his old teeth, he asked me what seemed to be the problem. What was wrong with me? He looked at me strangely when I hurriedly asked him if he could prescribe some medicine for a stomach-ache without examining me. ‘Relax, Madame,’ he said, ‘I can’t possible give you medication without first making a diagnosis. And I can’t make a diagnosis without examining you.’

“So, I allowed him to examine me. He nodded his head, satisfied with his diagnosis, and gave me two kinds

of medicine and strict instructions about what to eat and what to avoid for the next couple of days.

"If I had met Marco by chance in the street, I would never have recognised him. Just as he failed to recognise in the crazy Frenchwoman who undressed behind the screen the young Cécile of his youthful infatuation. I left disenchanted. I walked slowly back to the hotel, ambling around the streets, trying to take an interest in the shop windows.

"Marco was gone, the dream was lost. I had to come to terms with reality.

"When I got back to the hotel, I sat for a while on the little corner balcony. I looked out at the sea, then at Saad Zaghloul Square and beyond Ramleh Station. Alexandria has changed too. Of course, it's not as unrecognisable as Marco, but it's no longer the Alexandria that I carried around inside me for so many years, the Alexandria that I conjured up in difficult times, reassuring myself with the thought that, one day, perhaps I would go back and live there again. I'm losing the Alexandria that I believed would be waiting for me. But is it better this way? Have I lost Utopia, or have I lost everything?"

Cécile was quiet. Seeing that she was tormented by the same thoughts that had been hounding me for days, I longed to tell her how beautiful she was, to tell her that her blue eyes held the very skies, to confess so many other thoughts, but I kept them to myself.

There is a time for everything, and words that might have been enchanting coming from the lips of the young

Marco forty years before would have seemed out of place coming from me now.

“As we get older, we must take care; our actions should be in harmony with the course of our lives, with our age, they should conform with our circumstances.” These wise words had come from Sorial when Traver teasingly told him that it was high time he got married.

“You’re right,” Traver had replied, adding seriously, “I agree, it’s not enough for a mature person to feel good about himself, to be comfortable with what his heart tells him to do. His actions have to conform to the generally accepted rules of behaviour. The notion of ‘I’m all right Jack, and to hell with what anyone else thinks,’ is not right. The antics of youth are transformed into songs, poems, they are touching. Those of the mature person,” – he avoided using the word ‘old’ – “are a joke, the cause for ridicule and mockery. But, for goodness’ sake, that doesn’t mean that we should sacrifice our emotions. We mustn’t extinguish the flame in our hearts with the logic of respectability.”

An octogenarian English lady, renowned for the romantic adventures that had embellished her life, was once asked at what age a woman stops falling in love. And she replied, as if the question itself were incomprehensible, “How would I know? I haven’t reached that age yet.”

“For as long as we live, we are capable of falling in love. The beating of the heart is never absolutely controlled by age, but we should take care to live those special, tender moments discreetly in the moonlight, for shameless

outcries in the harsh light of day are unbecoming – are unacceptable.”

I wanted to add to what Sorial and Traver said that every pleasant moment that we experience in the course of our lives is unique. As the years go by, the flutterings of the heart become less frequent. Every beautiful moment that is lost, is lost forever. What is left is the bitter aftertaste of the fleeting paradise that you allowed to pass you by, and the torturing remorse at the loss.

This time last year, a friend, a Greek journalist, had invited me and a group of colleagues on a Nile cruise. It was almost Spring, and the promise of the Egyptian sunshine after a heavy London winter was most alluring. As was the draw of those famed mythical ancient places: Luxor, Karnak, Aswan, Abu Simbel.

But I hesitated... I had some professional obligations to fulfil. In the end, I did not go.

“Ah, my good man,” my friend, who was my age, criticised, “How can you miss an opportunity to sail down the Nile in springtime? How many more times do you think Spring will come for us? Count them.”

The previous evening, as I was sitting with Cécile on the hotel balcony overlooking the Corniche, I remembered that missed cruise, the cruise down the Nile that I had not been bold enough to take – and the words of my friend seemed to chide me:

“How many more times in your life will you be granted the opportunity to sense the beams of the Pharos through

closed eyes, and it is springtime, and the moon has circled the skies just for you, and you are sharing with a beautiful woman – an Alexandrian dreamer – the exquisite delusion of heaven on earth. Count them. Count them...”

For a long time, Cécile and I sat quietly there on the hill of Kom el Nadoura, each absorbed in parallel thoughts, while the city at our feet, dressed in shades of grey, continued to breathe languidly.

From the dovecote of a rooftop opposite, the sudden flight of a flock of pigeons startled the sky. It was as if countless souls were being set free. Flying low, the birds formed a closed ring, then a more open circular formation, and then they flew higher, passed over our heads and disappeared over the far side of the hill.

Cécile watched the pigeons and whispered:

“No, I have not lost everything, Alexandria has given me everything she promised in my dreams.”

And as she often did when feeling uneasy, she suddenly changed the subject.

“Let’s talk about your book. How’s the ‘guide’ coming along?”

Over the past days, I had carefully avoided mentioning the ‘Guidebook to Alexandria’. Now I had to admit that the enthusiasm I had felt on the first day had been followed by moments of uncertainty. Alexandria may be in need of a tourist guide, but as the days passed, as I got to know the modern city better, I began to feel more and more doubtful. Was I capable of writing the guidebook that I had

envisaged? A guidebook that followed in the footsteps of Forster?

Forster's book is not the sort of guide one normally finds. It is both a significant literary work and a reliable textbook on the history and topography of the city. It is a guide that makes you feel as if the author himself is taking you by the hand and leading you around this magical place. You can feel how much Forster loved Alexandria, how close he felt to the city. The book prompts you to visit the town centre, the neighbourhoods with the narrow alleyways, the museum and archaeological sites, to climb aboard the tram, to take a horse-drawn carriage, to discover all the things that he saw and loved. During these wanderings, he often asks us to close our eyes and drift back in time, to enter the capital city of the Ptolemies, the city of Cleopatra, of Caesar. Then he transports us to the Alexandria of the first Christians striving to form a new faith. The curious reader follows him through the decaying mediaeval Iskandereya of the Arabs and the Ottomans.

When E.M. Forster returns to the present day of his time, we find ourselves in the cosmopolitan Alexandria of the First World War. Of this Alexandria, only wounded buildings remain today.

What sort of guidebook could I write? To what place and time would I bring my readers? A guidebook should be about the present, above all about the present. It cannot be only about the past, the distant past and the recent past. You cannot force your readers to keep their eyes constantly closed, to rely completely upon their imagination.

It occurred to me that the Belgian who had been so critical of the city the day I arrived in Alexandria had not been completely wrong. I told Cécile about the complaining of the disillusioned tourist who had looked forward to finding one Alexandria and had found another.

“Dear Cécile, Alexandria is special to us, because we entrusted her with our childhood dreams. She is special to Bill, because he came to know the city between battles. She is special to Sorial, because he himself is special – he is an Alexandrian.

“But the Alexandrians don’t need a guidebook to their city, they carry her in their soul.”

EPILOGUE (ONE YEAR LATER)

More than a year has passed since I came to Alexandria to prepare the 'guidebook' that I never actually wrote. I look back on that week spent at the Cecil with Cécile, Miléna, Bill and Sorial with nostalgia. I think about the 'guidebook' that remained unfinished inside my head, just as my thoughts remained incomplete as I gazed down at the city from the hill of Kom el Nadoura that day. It was April then. Now it is June.

In Alexandria, June is a special month. What is so special about it? In June the 'trees of fire' come into bloom. The French call these trees *flamboyants*, that is, 'afire'. The locals call them *bossianis*. I think the word is Italian.

I have tried to find out what they are called in Greek, but nobody seems to know. Apparently, as they are tropical trees, found here far from their natural habitat, they have never been included in the Greek vocabulary. How strange! I do not remember ever having seen *flamboyants* when I lived in Alexandria. How could I have not noticed them?

It is well worth travelling all the way to Alexandria if only to appreciate the blossoming 'trees of fire', as I call them, particularly at the beginning of the summer. At other times of year they are simply plain, large trees, thick with small bright-green leaves. You would never dream of the beauty they hide within. You simply walk past them without paying

any particular attention. But at the end of May and the beginning of June these unassuming trees burst into flame. When I saw them, I could not believe my eyes. It was as if they had been painted with a blazing brush that, instead of scorching the leaves, had turned them as red as fire.

I returned to the hotel. Yes, I was staying at the Cecil again. I sat at the same table to the right of the entrance, drinking a glass of 'Stella' beer. Sitting there, with your back to the window that overlooks Saad Zaghloul Square, you can watch the passers-by in the huge mirror that hangs, splendid and silent, on the other side of the reception hall.

So, Alexandria still had something more to offer me, I mused, something new, as if to honour my return the city wished to cajole me with an exceptional gift.

As the years go by, so surprises become rarer. As the years go by, so the little things in life become more significant, as if the innocence of early childhood is restored. How could I never have noticed the 'trees of fire' when I was a child in this city?

If I am to visit Alexandria once a year, I shall be sure to do so in early summer to enjoy the *flamboyants*. For me, their discovery has completed a blossoming, mystical triangle. For that flowering, early summer tree stands handsomely alongside the wildly blooming almond trees that, defying the frost, smile full of promise down the steep slopes of the Atridae's austere Acropolis of Mycenae. Happily, this trinity of beauty also includes the wisteria. I can see them now, hanging like bunches of blue-lilac-coloured papillonaceous grapes, their sweet fragrance filling the tiny museum

courtyard that rests nonchalantly against the walls of the Knights' Castle.

Alexandria, Mycenae, Rhodes; blessed triangle defined by beloved flowers.

Although the mirror opposite reflects the steady swaying of a towering date palm, its head raised in a vain attempt to catch a glimpse of the hopelessness of the desert, I optimistically see flowers all around. Flowers I had been carrying around inside me and which the vision of the 'flamboyants' had set free.

The sea nearby sends her waves crashing violently in. Hurlled from the north, they burst angrily into the Great Harbour, the Eastern *Megas Limin*, jealously vying for my attention. But my thoughts are with Cécile, who I first saw last year whilst sitting at this same table. She was wearing that red dress, a dress the colour of fire, decorated with strange, large, exquisite white flowers.

She knew that I liked that dress. She wore it when we travelled to the Provence together. We visited Alphonse Daudet's windmill in Fontvieille. I let her walk on ahead down the narrow path. Her red dress glowed, in bright contrast to the greenery which spread out all around like a vast exquisite carpet. From time to time, she looked back and with a smile full of sunshine, encouraged me to follow her.

Cécile had longed to accompany me on this trip to Alexandria, but I wanted to be alone. On my last visit, I had shared the city with others, now I wanted her all to myself.

After Cécile, I thought of Traver.

I wonder what is he doing now? He is probably sleeping. After all, he decided to make his home in the Antipodes. Bill had been charmed by a small island in the Samoa archipelago, somewhere in the Pacific.

How did he end up there? According to his letter, he had gone on a long voyage on a friend's yacht. They had set off from Suez for Australia, after which they were to sail around the world. Bill had spoken to us about his plans for this voyage that was to be his swan song of the seas. We knew that he had intended to start out as soon as he got back from Alexandria. They reached Australia. They stayed there a while before going on to Eastern Polynesia. When they anchored off a small island, Bill met and fell in love with the daughter of a local Chieftain. They were soon married. And the boat sailed on to the east without Bill.

He concluded his letter to me recounting the news of his adventure, saying: "I try to live simply, without the unnecessary trappings of our culture. I left my camera behind, so I can't send you a photograph of my wife. But look at Gauguin's painting in the gallery in Copenhagen, the one called '*Woman with flower*' – she bears an amazing resemblance to my princess." And he went on: "Why am I telling you this? So that you can show this letter to Sorial, who will poke fun at me and so that you can tell him that I chose to live out the years that are left to me in this earthly paradise. For when you find paradise, you do not pass it by. It's a sin to pass it by."

I no longer judge others. It is only myself that I sometime

reprove. May God keep you well where you are, Bill, far away in the Southern Seas. Don't worry, Sorial will understand.

I was brought back to the land of the Ptolemies by the call of the *muezzin* to midday prayer. I remembered Hosni's prayer that so moved me at the tomb of the little Jewish girl. When I told Miléna about it, she fell silent. Her eyes filled with tears. Perhaps that was the reason that she had so taken to the young archaeologist.

I later learned from Cécile that a romance had sprung up between them.

I got up to go to my room, to rest before setting out on my latest tour of the city. Is this the first day of a new visit, or the eighth day, the continuation of the former one?

As I catch sight of myself in the great mirror, it occurs to me that I am beginning to resemble the city: less hair, more wrinkles, the years lying heavily upon me.

Sorial was right. When I explained to him the reasons why I had not written 'A Guide to Alexandria', he had said: "Don't be in a hurry to make that decision right away. Just as forming a deep relationship with a woman demands serious consideration, so making hasty decisions about Alexandria is rash. Don't be over-enthusiastic and don't despair. Let a little time pass and then come back again... alone preferably. You know, the older we get, the more we become like this city. The more we realise what irreparable damage time is doing to us, the more we take refuge in the past. Alexandria is like that. For years she has been a city of memories."

The diminutive bellboy held the door of the elevator open for me. I stepped inside and as we began our leisurely ascent, he started once again to relate the tales of Montgomery, Omar Sherif, Tino Rossi, Josephine Baker, and all the others who had once been guests at the Cecil.

And I remained still, silent, fearing the ghosts that meandered carefree from floor to floor might fade and be forever lost.

GLOSSARY

Ar = Arabic; Arm = Armenian; Fr = French; En = English; Tur = Turkish

Ali Pasha: (Ar) the Albanian governor of the Greek province of Epirus at the beginning of the 19th century, just before the upraise for independence

Ali: (Ar) a common Egyptian name. The Egyptian émigrés in France, as Prince Ali, would pronounce it with emphasis on the "i" rather than the "a" in an attempt to Europeanize the name

aroussa: (Ar) a bride; also the name for a sugar dolls, usually brightly colored, that are both toys and sweets, given to children on feast days

Ashram: a hermitage in India where sages lived in peace and tranquility amidst nature. Today, the term "ashram" is sometimes used to refer to a community formed primarily for spiritual upliftment of its members, often headed by a religious leader or mystic

askari: (Ar) is an Arabic, Turkish, Persian, and Swahili word meaning "soldier" . It was normally used to describe indigenous troops in East Africa and the Middle East serving in the armies of European colonial powers. Locally recruited askari soldiers were employed by the Italian, British, Portuguese, German and Belgian colonial forces

assab: (Ar) sugar cane. Assir assab: Sugar cane juice

bakshish: (Ar) pourboire, tip

Berber: (Ar) a nomad of the desert.

bawwab, bawwaba: (Ar) janitor, door-keeper. Entrance to the building or the small room located generally under the stairwell where the bawwab and his family live

Bo'sun: (En) a petty officer on a ship in charge of all work on deck

Copt: an Egyptian Christian of the Copt Orthodox Church

Corniche: (Fr) the coastal road in Alexandria – one of the most renowned in the Mediterranean; it runs from the Eastern Port to the ancient Lesser Taposiris, the Peninsula of Montazah and beyond. The construction of the Corniche started at the end of the 19th century and continued until circa 1910. In the years 2000 – 2005 the Corniche was widened to ease the traffic

dragoman: (Ar) interpreter

Effendi: (Ar, Tur) a Turkish title meaning a lord or master. A title of respect or courtesy, equivalent to the English Sir

esbah (Ar) private agricultural estate in rural Egypt

Eunostos: ancient Alexandria had two ports; the Eastern, the Megas Limin and the Western, the Eunostos, the Port of the Good Return for the Greeks

Expedition [l']de l'Egypte: (Fr) a colossal publication in 14 volumes containing the profusely illustrated description of Egypt, its monuments and history made by Bonaparte scientists from 1798 to 1801

fakino : (It) porter in Italian

fadal : (Ar) be welcomed

Fayoum: (Ar) oasis south of Cairo with extensive Late Roman and Early Christian burials. A portrait of the deceased

painted on wood was usually placed over the face of the mummified body; these portraits of men and women are usually characterised by large well defined eyes

felouka : (Ar) traditional Nile river wooden boat with a large triangular sail

fellah, fellahin : (Ar) Peasant farmer of Egypt (plural fellahin)

foul: [Ar] baked fava beans, a staple of the Egyptian diet

gellabiya : (Ar) long tunic traditionally worn by Egyptian men

gerdel: (Ar) metal bucket

golla: (Ar) water cooler recipient made of clay

hejab: (Ar) a Muslim woman's headscarf, covering the hair and part of the face

Imam: (Ar) the leader of a mosque and the community. Similar to spiritual leaders, the imam is the one who leads the prayer during Islamic gatherings. More often the community turns to the mosque imam, if they have an Islamic question. In smaller communities an imam could be the community leader based on the community setting.

henna: (Ar) vegetal pigment used to color women hair.

kaymakam (also spelled kaimakam (Tur) was the title used for the governor of a provincial district in the Ottoman Empire

Khamsin: (Ar) hot, sand-laden wind that blows in Egypt usually in spring

Khedive: (Tur) derived from Persian for "lord" was a title first used by Mohamed Ali as governor and monarch of Egypt and Sudan, and subsequently by his dynastic successors.

Lake Mariout: (Ar.) Ancient Lake Mareotis

Lavoisier: (Fr) Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier (26 August 1743 – 8 May 1794; the father of modern chemistry)

Lazaretto: [It] Quarantine building mostly used during the repeated plague epidemics. Suspects would be kept in isolation for forty days

milaya: (Ar) black wrap worn by Egyptian women in traditional quarters.

Mameluks: [Tur - Ara] a slave soldier who converted to Islam and served the Muslim caliphs and the Ayyubid sultans from the 9th to the 13th centuries. Over time, they became a powerful military caste often defeating the Crusaders. On more than one occasion, they seized power for themselves; for example, ruling Egypt in the Mamluk Dynasty from 1250–1517

Meeserschmitt: German fast fighting plane used during World War II

Mohafez: (Ar) Governor; since the Byzantine period Alexandria had a Governor, not a Mayor

mouezin: (Ar, Tur) a chosen person at the mosque who leads the call (adhan) to Friday prayer

moudir: (Ar) Manager

moucharabieh: (Ar) or Shanashil a type of projecting oriel window enclosed with carved wood latticework located on the second storey of a building or higher. An element of traditional Arabic architecture used since the middle ages up the early 20th century

nabout: (Ar) a quarterstaff constructed of palm wood or rattan

okella: (Gr) building of two or more floors with one or more apartments on each floor (from the Arabic wikala)

omdeh: (Ar) Chieftain, the Elder of a village

RAF: Royal Air Forces

roupies: Indian currency

Sakiyeh: (Ar) or **Sakia** an animal driven water wheel, somewhat similar to a noria, and used primarily in Egypt. It is a large hollow wheel, normally made of wood or of galvanized sheet steel, with scoops or buckets at the periphery

schistosomiasis, schistosoma, bilharzia: (En) *Schistosoma Manzoni*, one of the many parasite infections which occurs to humans by wading or bathing in infected waters

Shamn el Nessim: (Ar) the Egyptian spring festival, on the Monday following the Greek Orthodox Easter

Shami: (Ar) a Syro-Lebanese

sarai: (Tur) a palace

serasker: (Tur) officer in the army

Sheih: (Ar) or **Sheikh**, and other variants is a word or honorific term that literally means "elder". It is commonly used to designate an elder of a tribe, a revered wise man

sofra: (Ar) low eating table

Southern Sporades: the Dodecanese Islands

Stukas: German bombarding war plane used during the Second World War

Tarboush: (Ar) the Turkish fez, a red felt hat in the shape of a truncated cone

tsaous, shaouish: (Tur, Ar) Police constable

yavroum: (Arm) my treasure

Yiahoudi: (Ar) Jew

zembil:[Ar] a straw basket