MODERN ARABIC SHORT STORIES

BY M. SPRENGLING

THE READERS of this journal were told something over a year ago that modern Arabs were creating a modern literature quite distinct from the medieval productions which have up to now been known to the West as Arabic literature. Something of the problems of this modern literary movement and the ways in which young Arabic authors were trying to solve these problems were sketched in the numbers for September 1932 and December 1932. We here offer to members of the New Orient Society and to readers of this journal six short stories. Three of these were written by a young Mohammedan of a fine old family, Muhammad Taimur, who was born in Cairo in 1892 and who, after study and work abroad, returned to Cairo to die there in 1921, much too soon for the promise he gave. The sort of stories and sketches which young Arab authors produce nowadays cannot be better illustrated for American readers than by offering to them the following three tales.

CREAM WITH COFFEE AND CREAM WITH CLAY

This morning, after I had risen from my bed and put on my dressing gown, the maid came in with the breakfast that I might eat before going out. I cast my eyes over the food and found sufficient variety, cheese and olives and eggs and cream and coffee. My appetite was keen, and I ate of the cheese and the olives and the eggs until I was satisfied. Then I glanced at the cream and coffee and said to myself: "I drink cream with coffee every morning. Today I am satisfied with other things, and it is not possible for me to add to what is already in my stomach any cream whatever." So I rose to dress for the street. As I pushed back my chair I saw my dog wagging his tail at me. So I emptied what there was of cream in my cup into the dog's bowl, and left him with his meal.

I boarded the train for Alexandria and finished some business I had there. Then I was ready to return. But I had to wait a little while at the station pending the arrival of the train which was to carry me. As I walked I spied a man of about fifty and, running after him, a little fellow who was clearly his son. The man was carrying a jar filled with some liquid, I knew not what—and the two

were trying to board a train which had just left the station and was a little way out. In a moment the boy fell to the ground and the father fell over him. By good luck neither of the two suffered any harm. The jar, however, was broken and what was in it flowed onto the ground. It was snow-white cream. The man gave it a look filled with grief, the tears ready to start from his eyes. Then he walked away with his son, as if he boded ill of what had happened, and returned by the way he had come.

I had scarcely resumed my walk when I saw two little fellows, street urchins of Alexandria, racing toward the place of the accident. They were dressed in rags that covered but little of their bodies, bareheaded, barefooted, with grime lying thick on their faces and their clothes. When they arrived at their goal, they knelt down on the ground and fell to lapping up the cream—and it was cream with clay, not with coffee.

This morning my jaded appetite had refused a cup of cream with coffee; the heart of these two poor ones was delighted with cream mixed with clay.

GREENS! OH RADISHES. (CRY OF THE STREETSELLER)

Yesterday morning I passed an hour in the café reading the paper and drinking a cup of coffee. Then I rose to return home for lunch. As I was passing by the post office, a youth accosted me. He was well tanned, clearskinned, strongly muscled, and lithe of movements. The brightness of his eyes indicated a cheerful and resolute heart. He wore a new top coat over a somewhat worn suit which was clearly the work of a well-known tailor. He accosted me with an assured "Good Morning," and I returned his greeting with a glance at him indicative of my astonishment and confusion.

I was saying to myself: "What does he want of me? I do not know him, have, indeed, never met him before today. Perhaps he is a friend of one of my friends through whom that friend wants to communicate to me some special matter concerning himself. Or has he some ulterior design?"

The youth walked beside me smiling and said: "Without doubt the colonel is bound for an appointment, because he is in such a hurry!"

"Not at all, sir, I am merely going home."

"Well then, can the colonel give me five minutes? The colonel

knows the wrongs an educated man suffers in Egypt. The colonel knows how sluggish is the market of higher education in Egypt. The colonel is interested in the cause of educated men in Egypt. The colonel aids educated men in Egypt."

I answered him with a sour smile: "And the colonel has in his pockets no more than the price of a street-car ticket." He laughed and said: "I ask for no more than a quarter and no less than a dime, and the colonel is generous." I produced a dime from my pocket, gave it to him, and turned away from him to board a street car.

I got off the street car and turned in the direction of my home. As I turned into my street I found before me an old man of about sixty. He was stout of frame but bent of back, and he had a white beard which fell upon his breast. He was pushing a little hand cart loaded with radishes which he was selling. He would walk a little way, then he would stop a little, shouting at the top of his lungs: "Greens! Oh Radishes."

People were passing him on every side, but not one of them was moved to sufficient pity to lavish on him the price of a glass of beer which they were accustomed to drink every evening.

The man moved along until he had reached the end of the street. I was nearly abreast of him, when once more he cried: "Greens! Oh Radishes," then halted a moment to rest, and presently sank to the ground. I hurried to him with my servant, and we found him lying on the ground, faint with fatigue, too weak to speak. We carried him to my house that he might rest himself and refresh himself with food and drink.

Heavens above, what a difference between these two! The first, a youth who had chosen loafing for his craft and education for a means thereto; and loafing is the path of disintegration to the stage in which finer sensibilities die—or more aptly, it is cultured death. The other, an old man whom age had crippled and whom weakness had attained. But he refused to take a backward step in the great strife, the strife of life. It was out of the question for him to stretch forth his hand to beg. He stuck to his work, preferring death to faint-heartedness. And work is the path of ascent to that rank in which a man rises to the height of nobility or in which he dies a hero's death.

TO THE POOR GRATIS

The clock was striking twelve, and the doctor was writing.

At that same hour one of the poor was sitting cross-legged [on the floor] beside the bed of his daughter, who was pregnant and screaming with pain. She was trembling from the cold; her teeth chattered and her lips were drawn back. Her tears were flowing down upon her cheeks, writing lines of distress and pain. She was about eighteen years old. Her husband had died, leaving her pregnant. She was near the hour of her delivery, her labor was severe, and she was within two spans of death.

The poor man sat cross-legged, his head clasped between his hands, his heart oppressed with grief, his eyes downcast, not knowing what to do, unable to find any means whereby he might relieve his daughter's pains. Presently his blind wife, who had been weeping and beating her head against the wall, was saying: "Have you forgotten that Dr. So and So treats the poor gratis? Go to him and knock at his door. Perhaps his heart will soften and he will snatch our daughter from the jaws of death." The man rose without so much as a single sound passing his lips, headed straight for the door and went out into the street to fetch the doctor. He walked, reeling like a drunken man, until he reached the doctor's doorstep. He knocked thrice. The black servant came out and shouted at him: "What do you want?"

"My daughter is dying; I want to speak to the doctor."

"He is very busy; and he warned me to admit no beggar."

The poor man reiterated: "But my daughter is dying." The servant slammed the door [in his face], and the poor man turned back the way he had come, his heart beating violently. But he stopped for a bit, just before he had reached his dwelling, and said to himself: "Yes, I will do that! What harm can it do to me, if I do it?" He saw a man walking slowly along the street. He stretched out his hand and said: "An alms, dear Sir." But the man repulsed him rudely and went on his way. A second man passed, and a third, and a fourth. And the poor man's lot was a failure each time. Suddenly a policeman was saying to him: "What's this, you fellow? Begging in the street? Come along to the station!" The poor man had nothing with which to stop that policeman's mouth. He could only say: "I am not a habitual beggar, Sir. But my daughter is dying and I tried to collect the doctor's fee. And I found no other

means than this." But the policeman led him along to the station, and there the poor man spent that night.

In the morning he returned to his dwelling, after he had been given his discharge. The clock was just striking ten. As he drew near, suddenly he heard a shouting and a wailing. He hurried to his home. There he found his wife, weeping and screaming, his daughter having just breathed her last. He bent over her, his standing gone—a jailbird.

At that same hour the doctor was in the midst of his peroration before the assembly, and he was shouting at the top of his lungs:—"Medicine, my friends, is the abundant well-spring which slakes the thirst of the poor without money and without price. Medicine is the hall which the sick enter at the very point of death and from which they depart sound and fully cured. Nay, medicine in my opinion, is like the very houses of God, gathering together the poor and the rich, the miserable and happy in one [grand] equality. Indeed, medicine is wider of heart to the poor and more sympathetic to the weak and the distressed!"

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The fourth sketch, to offset the three just presented, is by a Christian author, Anis al-Maqdisi, a man now about fifty years old, Professor of Arabic literature in the American University of Beirut. The feeling of the Arab-Christian as well as Mohammedan,—is well illustrated in his little sketch:—

THE HAJJ[1] IBRAHIM AND HIS HAPPY LIFE

In the autumn of the year 1921 the steamer entered the harbor of Alexandria with us on board. I was returning from America where I had spent about a year studying western civilization and examining it at close range. For some reason our steamer anchored at some distance from the pier and I was forced to effect a landing in a small skiff belonging to a seaman named the Hajj Ibrahim. Hajj Ibrahim was in his sixties, small of stature, very browned of face, wiry of build. His conversation was fluent, and his address was courteous. He wore a Moghrebine skull-cap type of fez, full trousers, and the Eastern clothes that went with these two. Beside him in the skiff were two young men, he managing the rudder, while they rowed.

[1]Hajj is a title of honor given to a Moslem who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The boat ride in eastern waters delighted me, as I drank in the perfumed air of the East and enjoyed myself in its invigorating calm. I had been away from the East for a full year, the greater part of which I had spent in New York, that great city which teems with humanity of all kinds. People course along like torrents in its streets and squares, each one running to his work, crowding, racing—each one seeking profit and a higher level in the social scale, turning aside for nothing and concerned with nothing besides his self-interest. A long time I had stood in a nook of its nooks watching this constant strife and observing the movement of the passers-by, for all the world like lines of ants intent upon the search for food. I had heard the roar of the automobiles and the busses and the tramways under the earth and over it. Movement! Movement! This is New York.

And this was the impression of it left in my soul on the day when I entered the harbor of Alexandria and rode in the boat of Hajj Ibrahim. I said [to myself]: "A delight to me is this Eastern sea and its perfumed breath! Nay, it is a delight to me after this long absence to see a pure Easterner who speaks my speech and thinks my thoughts." So I began to chat with the Hajj, and he proved to be a surprisingly good conversationalist, as he related the news and told his tales. And we spun out the threads of our speech as the skiff was gliding gently with us between the steamers lying at anchor. The bewilderment of the West and its civilization was still strong upon me, and so I began to tell him about New York and its sky-scrapers, and about its tramways, which travel above its streets and below them—even under the river which divides it from Brooklyn. And he would wag his head in wonderment at my tale and interrupt me with some naive question from time to time. Finally the course of the conversation carried us to the wealth of the Westerners, to their immersion in the maelstrom of their industries, to the deadly pace of their race in the arena of life.

Then the Hajj turned to me, after he had given the rudder a slight turn to the right, and said: "By your troth, Sir, it is greed that is killing men in these days. They fight for sustenance, and sustenance is in the hands of God. I am an old man, and more than forty years have passed over my head as I moved about on this sea carrying passengers and goods. Yet I have never stood in need of anyone, nor have I ever been forced to beg for a gift. God has granted me seven lads, all of them by his exalted power strong of

build and of good conduct. I have reared them to the best of my ability. Four of them I taught my trade and the other three a craft by which they live. All of them have families except this youth, who is still with me," and he pointed to one of the two young men who were rowing. "Praise be to God! Praise be to God. I am by the excellence of my Lord a thousand times favored and well off. And the whole parcel of them earn their daily bread and live in the fear of God. They do not drink, nor do they gamble or fight. And what will a man ask of his Lord more than this? Good health, sufficiency of sustenance, and a sound conscience?"

I heard the words of the Hajj and they touched my soul, like the breath of the perfumed sea, after what I had witnessed of the terrible tempest of civilization. I felt my spirit quickening. This practical philosophy seemed admirable to me, and I wanted him to spin more of it. So I said, as the buildings of Alexandria began to overshadow us: "But, my dear Hajj, do our souls not demand more than a sufficiency of food? Look at these big buildings and tell me, would you not like to have one of them? Would you not like to be a wealthy merchant and possess warehouses and landed estates? How will man achieve this, if he be satisfied with little and withdraw from the strife?"

He said in his gentle accents: "What have you to do with that? The giver is God. We praise him in any case and are content with what he allots to us. I, my brother, am a simple seaman. I do not know book-learning. I have nothing to do with government and commerce. Despite this, I am happy with what God has given me by way of health and work and children. God apportioned to me this trade and I stay by it happy and at peace and living as God and his apostle bid me. Shall a man take ought with him yonder? No, he will take nought but what is good of his deeds. By the Lord of the Kaaba,[2] it is greed and irreligiousness that make man miserable."

With that we had arrived at the shore. The boat's rudder demanded his attention for a moment and I was busied with my preparation for the landing. Then I paid him his hire and entered the city.

"Happy art thou, oh Hajj! May God increase the likes of thee!"

[2]The sanctuary at Mecca to which the pilgrimage is directed and to which one turns in prayer.

Somewhat older than the two authors just presented is Elias al-Ayyoobi (the Ayyubid, claiming descent from Saladin's dynasty), who was born at Acco in 1874. His prize book is a history of Egypt in the time of the Khedive Ismail Pasha. Ismail was the first to receive for his splendor the title Khedive. From the western viewpoint we know him as the man who fell for the attraction of easy borrowing from western bankers and so led Egypt toward British occupation and Lord Cromer. The East sees him in a different light, as we may perceive from Ayyoobi's story:

THE GENEROSITY OF THE KHEDIVE ISMAIL.

One of the great nobles of France invited the Khedive Ismail to a banquet in his palace, and the Khedive accepted the invitation. To his surprise he found a palace beautiful and majestic and sumptuously furnished, such as one scarcely expected to find except as the property of kings. Ismail was much taken with it, and after the meal, when conversation was going round in the smoking *salon*, he took occasion to express to his host his great admiration of his palace, and the noble thanked him for his kindness. But Ismail had been told that the man was in sore financial straits and he wanted to help him in some way which would not wound his sensibility. So he asked, did he want to sell his palace. Now the man, in spite of his great need for cash, did not think that he would be able to part with this splendid family seat. Yet he was loathe to meet the kindness of Ismail with a rude refusal. It occurred to him that he might set the price so high that it would induce Ismail to desist from his desire for the purchase. So he answered: "Yes, I will sell it, Sire, for 5,000,000 francs," while the actual value was not more than one and one-half millions. Ismail plucked the word from his mouth on the fly, and said: "I take it from you at that price," and immediately wrote him a check for the sum on one of the banks of Paris. The man saw no possibility of escaping from the sale. But Ismail at that very moment turned toward the daughter of that noble—a slender girl of fifteen—and said with his beautiful smile to her father: "Surely you cannot deprive me of the pleasure of turning over the bill of sale to this exquisite lady, your daughter, to commemorate the admiration of the Khedive of Egypt for her charm and gentility, and in order that it may not be said that I visited you only to deprive you of your property."

This majestic gift and the manner of its bestowal caused a rip-

ple of astonishment throughout the French capital and made Ismail a marked man and a cynosure of all eyes wherever he happened to be. Furthermore it helped him greatly in the realization of his highest wishes, which were directed toward the striking off of the fetters which bound the freedom of his country—I mean, what remained of the shadow of Ottoman authority, and foreign intervention.

We end with a feminist note. The modern movement in Arabic literature has produced a few eminent women authors. The outstanding Moslem woman who stands for woman's rights and dignity in Moslem society is Malak Nasif, who writes under the significant pen-name, The Searcher in the Desert. Born in Cairo 1886, she died still a young woman in 1918. The manner and matter of her appeal are well illustrated by her sketch:

WHY DOES A MAN LOSE HIS INFLUENCE IN HIS FAMILY?

A man spends his day in his place of business and in the evening slips away to some café to kill time without profit. He returns home only when his eyelids are heavy with sleep. Weeks pass, and he does not see his children except on a school holiday. They grow up, knowing nothing of character training and discipline. He cuts as short as possible his contact and his conversation with them, as though he feared that he would lose his dignity in talking with the little ones. Some of them maintain an attitude of dignified silence in the presence of their wives, until, when both he and she are bored, he takes up the newspaper to read. Yet he explains to her nothing of what is in the paper, if she be ignorant, nor does he read to her if she be intelligent. Then how may she know his ideas and his preferences, if he does not speak to her?

The boy of the house—by his father's care for him and by the frequency of his contacts with his fellows outside the home—gains useful experience. But the girl's portion is small in the way of that mental rearing, which is the foundation of character, and she gains little of the stock of general human knowledge, unless she be a person of strong will. Now it is my conviction that a wise and loving father, by social intercourse with his boys and girls, can compensate them for much which they cannot easily gain by experience.

I do not like the father who lords it over his family and his

children and appears to them in the guise of a severe tyrant, thinking that that will maintain respect and reverence for him and never suspecting how they feel about it. Respect in moderate measure is, indeed, necessary, but if it exceeds the proper bounds, it turns to fear. Then the father loses sympathetic contact with his children, and they lose much of their love and trust in their father. Frequently you will find little children, who love their mothers more than their fathers for this very reason. This high and mighty tyranny on the part of the father weakens and destroys the character of the children, since it fosters in them a spirit of cringing cowardice, which turns to wasteful recklessness, when they grow up. The children of avaricious parents are often the most wasteful spenders, when they are grown up.

I once visited a lady afflicted with a severe husband of this sort. We were chatting comfortably, the little ones were playing near by, and the older girls were laughing. Suddenly a terrified silence ensued, the mother was clearly embarassed, her eyes fell, and she grew pale. One of the girls hurriedly silenced the little ones, another listened at the staircase, a third went to see what she might straighten up in her father's room. I was surprised at this terrified commotion and asked for the reason of it. Then the lady, with manifest grief, scarcely daring to talk above a whisper, told me: "The lord and master may be approaching."

I said to myself: "If there is all this excitement, when there is still some doubt of his approach, then what will these women do, if they are told he is here?" Then the girls began to explain that they never spoke in the presence of their father, and that they always tried to keep out of his way, because he was easily roused to anger, and he did not permit them any little visits nor any friends. If any of them made a mistake in her service or was a little tardy, he flared up and reviled her. And when he partook of his meals, the mother and the three of them remained standing like maids until he had finished. I was astonished and grieved to find the growth of this spirit of despotism among our men, carried into their homes in the midst of their own flesh and blood.