

TESTAMENT: CAIRO 1898

THE PADRE ALWAYS stops by my bunk on his rounds. The sick bay of the ship is crammed. But they've given me a top bunk near to the ventilation pipe, so at least I can breathe, and I'm well out of the way of the rest of them. Before I left Cairo I managed to scrounge a notebook with enough pages to finish this last letter of mine.

My next of kin will probably be my sister Maude. In any case, whoever he or she may be who comes to open this packet, and begins to read these pages I've written, will be very shocked, I'm sure of it. But it's hypocrisy that keeps the world from knowing the truth about hundreds more people than you'd ever guess about. Anyhow I hope some people will understand.

The padre says the M.O. can't fathom me out. He says that I don't seem to fight against my illness. He says that all I'll do is scribble in this book. He always refers to me now as the scribe. But I don't care now. They can call me what they like. All I *want* to do is to get it written down. I'll leave this book with the rest of my junk.

I'll begin from the moment when I fell sick after the march up country on the way to fight the Dervishes in the Spring of 1898. I collapsed with a bad pain in my chest. I was invalided back down the Nile. I was coughing up blood.

The Military Hospital in Cairo was overcrowded and understaffed. Those who were strong enough to move had to lend a hand in helping the orderlies look after those who were really sick. My bed was at the end of the ward next to the wall. I was glad of this, because I felt so wretched that I just didn't want to talk to anyone.

I couldn't move, but when there was no orderly about and I wanted help of some kind, the boy in the next bed to me was always eager to give a hand. He was only a couple of years younger than me. He'd joined up in the army partly because he was fed up with life at home and partly because he'd been taken in by the glorious accounts of military life which still appear in newspapers and magazines in England. Within a fortnight of landing in Egypt he'd come down with a bad go of dysentery which had nearly killed him. He was better now. But the disease had left him weak and painfully thin.

Gradually I found out a bit about his home life. His name was Ted Mason, and he was sixteen years old. His family came from near Bath. He had a quiet voice with a pleasant Somerset accent, which immediately attracted me. His father worked as a railway porter at Bath station. His mother was a strict member of the Evangelical Society. The atmosphere of piety in their small cottage had become so wearisome to him that he'd decided to get away at any price. The army seemed the easiest possibility of escape.

Ted had very fair hair. A thick lock of it slanted down over his forehead. He kept pushing it back with his left hand. His features were very delicate. I could see that his skin was as soft as a girl's. With his large blue eyes and slightly girlish appearance I reckoned that he was going to have a rough time of it in the Army.

When I began to get stronger, Ted scrounged an old draughtsboard from the ward next door and we began to play chequers together. Ted didn't play very well because he'd start by being over-cautious. Then he'd make some rash move which would give me the advantage. He was a good loser but, even so, I let him win half the time because I enjoyed the look of happiness on his face when he'd beaten me. When I'd first arrived at the hospital his cheeks had been somehow sunken into his face, but as the days passed he began to get better and his face started to fill out. The flesh now seemed to glow on his limbs.

One afternoon I'd won three games of draughts in a row. Suddenly I saw a move I could make which would let Ted win a game. I made the move. I expected Ted to take advantage of it, but his hands remained still. I looked up at him as he sat by the side of my bed. From the expression on his face you'd think I'd done something to hurt or offend him.

"You did that on purpose," he said. "You made that move so I'd win."

"Rot," I answered.

"You did, all the same," Ted said. His Somerset burr had become more pronounced — as it always did when he was excited. "Can't you see that I enjoy playing draughts with you — whether I win or lose? And that's because you're my friend," he said.

As I gazed at him he smiled. His lips were rather full. His teeth were very white and straight. As he smiled the lock of fair hair had fallen over his forehead. I had a sudden desire to raise my hand and push the lock back into place. Then as I looked at the slenderness of him and the softness of his skin I

suddenly felt a pain of longing so strong that for a moment I couldn't breathe. I wanted to seize the boy there and then and hold him in my arms. I couldn't speak. I realised that Ted was now watching me with concern.

"Are you all right?" Ted asked. "You've gone quite white."

I tried to laugh. "I'm fine," I said. "In fact I'm so much better, I hope they'll let me out of this place in a fortnight's time."

"That's good," Ted said. "I reckon I'll be due for release about then, so we could go to the Sick-leave Camp together."

There was such eagerness in his voice that I glanced up at him. But he gazed back at me quite innocently.

Later that evening I tried to draw Ted out about his love-life — if any — down in Somerset. Immediately he became oddly bashful. Soon I detected that he was thoroughly embarrassed. This gave me hope, because obviously if he'd had a girl behind a haystack he wouldn't keep quiet about the fact. Presently, in a low voice so that the man in the next-door bed couldn't hear, he told me there was a girl he'd met one afternoon at some local fair. He told me her name was Mary and she was seventeen years old. But though he'd written to her he hadn't had any letter from her since he left England.

Quite frankly, I thought he'd made the story up. However, I hid my impatience to find out the truth. I now had only a fortnight to wait.

My plans for taking out Ted alone as soon as we reached the Sick-leave Camp were at first mucked up by the man in the bed on the other side of Ted. His name was George Wheeler. He was a trooper in a lancer regiment. He was in the hospital because he'd broken a leg in a fall from his horse when he was on exercises. He was a hefty-looking bloke of about thirty, with small inquisitive eyes, and thick lips which, for some reason, he kept licking with his tongue. His face was flabby and of a sickly greenish tinge. Yet he gave the impression of immense strength. Though his looks were against him, George was very popular in the ward because he had a tremendous fund of thoroughly dirty stories which he loved to tell. Some of them were really funny. I noticed that Ted laughed at them as loudly as the rest of us. For all his ugliness, George had a way with him, and as soon as his leg made it possible for him to hobble about the ward I saw that he spent most of his time between our two beds. He seemed equally fond of both of us. In a husky voice, flatteringly pitched into a tone of confidence, he'd tell us of his sexual

adventures in the back streets of the Cairo Medina. He told us there was a child-brothel which he'd twice visited.

"It's strictly out of bounds," he said. "I expect it's even illegal among the Gippos. But the boss of the place is careful to keep on the right side of the police. He buys the kids from families who are starving. The little bints are quite something, I can promise you. Some of them haven't even been broken in."

I glanced up at Ted's face whilst he was listening to this story. His eyes were shining with excitement.

"Couldn't the three of us go one evening?" Ted asked. "When we get to the Sick-leave Camp?"

George's tongue slid over his upper lip. "You bet we could," he said. "That is, unless our friend here has any objection."

I'd been with a bint when I first came out to Cairo. I'd enjoyed it all right at the time and, it seemed, so had the bint. She'd begged me to come back — and that was even before I'd paid her off. I'd enjoyed the love-making for the moment. But afterwards it had left me with a sad feeling of dissatisfaction, only partly caused by my fear that I might have caught something.

"I've no objection," I said. "But let's make sure we find some girls who haven't got the clap."

Discipline at the Sick-leave Camp was severe, but there weren't enough N.C.O.s to enforce the rules which the Colonel in charge had posted on the main notice board. At night it was well known that if you tipped the sentry on the gate you could get out. So, five days after we'd arrived at the camp, Ted, George and I — with George leading — were walking cautiously along the narrow alleys of the Medina. We stopped outside a door which, although its paint had flaked off in patches, had the look of being very solid. There was a bell-handle to the right of the door. George pulled it three times. We waited for a while. In the silence, we could hear footsteps coming down stairs. A slat in the door was pulled back and an eye peered out at us. Then the slat was snapped shut and the door was opened. We walked into a dimly lit small hallway. The whitewashed walls were streaked with damp. The whole place reeked of decay and cheap scent.

Once my eyes got used to the faint light, I could make out the man who had opened the door for us. He was slim, with a narrow face and a dark skin. With his hooked nose and narrow eyes he looked more Turkish than Arab.

He wore baggy white pantaloons and gold slippers. His tunic was fastened at the neck. It was made of silk embroidered with silver. Stuck into the belt around his waist was a silver-handled whip which hung loosely at his side like a snake.

He seemed pleased to see Ted and me. But when he recognised George, he scowled and began to jabber at him in Arabic. I only knew a few words of the lingo. However, George had told us that he'd picked up quite a bit of the language during the time he'd been in Egypt, and he answered back the brothel-keeper with confidence. I could see the man glancing towards Ted and me from time to time. Then he shrugged his shoulders and led us up the stone stairs. We entered a long room with a cushion-covered divan running the whole length of one side of it. Immediately George sat himself down on the divan and motioned for Ted and me to sit down beside him. The man now spoke a few more words to George in Arabic.

"He wants to know what we'd like to drink," George explained. "If you take my advice you'll stick to beer. The whiskey here is doctored muck — as I've got good reason to know."

"When are we going to see the bints?" Ted asked, after we'd ordered three bottles of beer.

George laughed. "Hark at the infant," he said, leering towards me. "He can't even wait five minutes for it."

"What were you arguing about with the brothel-keeper?" I asked George.

For an instant George looked embarrassed. "Last time I was here there was a bit of a row because he claimed I'd hurt one of the girls," he answered. "But I soon put him right on that. I explained that she was only screaming and carrying on so as to get more money out of me."

"Why does the man carry a whip?" I asked.

George guffawed. "He's got a regular little school to look after here," he explained. "Sometimes he has to use the whip to keep discipline."

At that moment, the door opened and about a dozen girls began to file in. They were all of them naked.

"Now we'll have the parade," George said.

But I'd hardly heard his words for I was staring at the girls in dismay. They were indeed children. Some of them couldn't have been more than twelve — if that. The girls now lined up against the wall opposite us and stood facing us in silence. The brothel-keeper shuffled in with our three bottles of beer.

“Who’s going to choose first?” George asked. “I think little Ted should. After all, he’s the youngest, and I bet it’s his first go.”

I glanced towards Ted. I thought that he might be nervous. But as he drank his beer his gaze was fixed on the girls.

“That suits me,” he said, and took another gulp of his drink.

“Then which one is to be?” George asked.

Ted pointed to a girl of about fourteen. Her breasts were large and rounded and her waist was very narrow. Her skin was lighter in colour than the rest of them.

“You’ve chosen well,” George said. “I’ve had my eye on that girl for quite a while. She’s light-skinned and blue-eyed because she’s a Circassian from Northern Syria. Circassian girls are in great demand in Egypt. I expect you’ll find she’s good at her job.”

“Your turn next,” George said, turning to me.

But as I’d looked at the children, I’d already made up my mind I wasn’t going to have any one of them. Yet if I refused now, both George and Ted might well guess my secret. I pointed to a dark-skinned girl who looked older and more brazen than the rest.

“I’ll take *her*,” I said.

George finished his bottle of beer, belched, stood up, and lumbered over the line of girls. He walked along the line, touching their breasts as he moved past them, and stopped in front of a small girl. She was very tiny and very thin. She couldn’t have been more than thirteen. Her tawny skin glistened in the lamplight. She looked up at George in fear. George put a large red hand around her neck and drew her towards him.

“I’ll have this one,” he said gruffly.

The brothel-keeper held out his hand.

“We pay him in advance,” George said. “You can give your girl what present you like at the end of it.”

We produced the tariff in piastres. The brothel-keeper tucked the money away in the breast pocket in his tunic. He snapped out some words of command to the three girls, opened the door and led the way for us up the stairs on to the second floor. We walked into a large dormitory which was divided into cubicles by partitions. Even before we had left the downstairs room, with its long divan, the girls left behind had clustered together and had begun chattering as if they were on a school-treat.

The brothel-keeper opened the door of the far cubicle. George and his little girl went into it. I heard the sound of the key being turned in the lock. The man's hand was now fixed on the whip at his side. He motioned to the dark-skinned girl I had chosen to go into the next cubicle. I followed her in, and I also locked the door. I heard Ted and his Circassian girl enter the cubicle next door. I heard the lock turn. Then I heard the brothel-keeper shuffle out of the room.

"*Ismak ey?*" I asked my girl, using the few words of Arabic I'd picked up.

"*Ageleye,*" she answered.

"*Enti quyaisis,*" I said to her. "You're very sweet."

When she smiled I saw a glitter of gold teeth; so obviously she hadn't been destitute all her life. Slowly I began to take off my clothes. I still hadn't made up my mind if I would have her or not.

From George's cubicle next door I heard a clatter as the belt from his trousers fell to the ground. The partitions dividing the room into cubicles did not reach the ceiling, so every sound carried. An instant later I hear the rustle of the mattress on the floor. Then, I heard a little gasp of pain from the child. A few moments later the mattress rustled again. The partitions were so thin that I could even hear George's heavy breathing. Then there was a sudden scream of pain from the little girl.

"*La!*" she cried out. "*La — Min fadlak. Min fadlak.*"

Her words ended in a muffled kind of moan, and I guessed that George had put a hand over her mouth.

I was naked now, but I felt sick and disgusted. If I'd been a perfectly normal person, I suppose I might have burst open the lock in the cubicle next door and stopped the cruel scene that was probably taking place. But I had Ted to think of. I didn't want to risk a fight with George then and there. The Egyptian police might be called and we'd all be put on a charge — if only for being out of bounds.

From Ted's cubicle, on the other side of me, there came not a sound. Meanwhile my dark-skinned girl, Ageleye, was lying on the bed, looking up at me enquiringly. I sat down on the bed beside her. I stroked her cheek and tried to make it clear to her that I didn't want to make love that night. But even as I spoke her soft hand was sliding between my legs. Then she put her other arm around my neck and pulled my head towards her. Her tongue pressed against my lips, gently and caressingly until I opened my mouth, and

her tongue plunged between my lips. Then her tongue began turning in my mouth in a very slow, rhythmic way, while her hands between my thighs never stopped their delicate movements. When she realised that I was excited, she lay on her back and almost pulled me down into her — and all the time she wriggled with that same slow rhythm. Soon it was all over. We lay back panting, entwined in each other's warm limbs.

As we lay, I could hear the girl in George's cubicle crying softly. I could hear George dressing himself. I heard him unlock his door and walk out of the dormitory. He had not spoken a word to the little girl.

From the cubicle on the other side there still came not a sound. I longed to know what was going on. As if she had guessed my thoughts, Ageleye gave me a smile like a mischievous child. She got up from the bed and walked towards the partition which divided me from the scene I fancied watching. On our side the partition was covered by an old striped blanket. Carefully Ageleye drew the blanket aside. In the partition was a small crack. She looked through it and shook her head. She beckoned me to come and look through the gap in the partition. Stealthily on my bare feet, I walked up to the gap. I put my eye to it and peered through.

The Circassian girl was lying flat on her back on the mattress. Her legs were parted in the usual position. Ted was kneeling between her legs desperately trying to arouse himself. It was obvious from the girl's bored expression that nothing had happened. It was also obvious from the sweat on Ted's face, from his look of despair, and from his limpness, that nothing ever would happen. For the first time I saw his body completely naked, and mixed with my fierce desire for him was now a kind of pity.

Then I realised that I was hooked. I knew that I was in love with him.

When we got back to the Sick-leave Camp that evening, Ted and I said good night to George whose tent was on the nearside of the camp. I was glad to be away from him. His bragging descriptions of what he'd done to the girl in his cubicle almost made me retch. Ted and I walked stealthily back towards the big hospital tent in which our beds were side by side. We were silent. I couldn't think of anything to say, and I suppose Ted was still feeling ashamed because he hadn't been able to have his girl.

"Did you have a good time?" Ted asked me after a while.

"Yes," I answered. "Fine."

"My girl was terrific," Ted said. "I really let her have it good and proper."

I was silent once again. Then I had an idea. “If we can get out to-morrow night by dropping the guard some *baksheesh*, why don’t we go for a sail on the Nile? We can hire a *felucca* for a few piastres. With the full moon it ought to be tremendous,” I said.

“Should we take George too?” Ted suggested.

“No,” I said. “To tell you the truth — I’m getting a bit browned off with George and his dirty stories. Let’s go — just the two of us.”

“That’s all right with me,” Ted answered.

We hired the *felucca* easily enough. The crew consisted of an old man and a boy. The old man held the rudder while the boy — he looked about fourteen — hauled up the triangular sail. There was hardly a breath of wind. The Nile was so smooth it might have been made of steel. It reflected, in occasional rivulets, the full moon which hung in the sky above us and seemed so low it might have been a lantern in a courtyard.

At first Ted and I sat in the stem with the old man who reminded me of some figure in a stained glass window. He had a thin, wizened, dried-up face. His *galabieh* which fell from his shoulders to his grimy feet made him look a bit like an Old Testament prophet. Once we had reached the middle of the Nile a cool breeze sprang up. Presently I saw Ted give a little shiver. This was the moment I’d been waiting for.

I passed him the bottle of *arak* I’d bought for the occasion. He passed it back to me, and I had a swig. It was real fire-water. Then I offered the bottle to the old man, but he shook his head. I took another long gulp from the bottle myself. I looked towards the old man. For an instant his cunning bleary eyes flickered between the two of us. Ted didn’t understand the meaning of the expression on the old man’s face. But I did, so next time he glanced towards me I gave him a very slight wink. You don’t have to talk much to the Arabs. Somehow they seem to guess what you’re thinking in a flash. The old man got up and shuffled towards the arched section of canvas which covered almost the whole length of the boat, and served as a cabin of sorts. He unfastened a canvas flap and drew it back. A small oil lamp was burning in the cabin. There was a bunk on either side of it.

“*Tfaddal*,” the old man said, “Enter.”

I smiled at Ted and went into the cabin. It stank of paraffin and *hashish*. Ted followed me in and sat on the bunk opposite me.

“What’s all this about?” Ted asked.

“I don’t know,” I lied. “Perhaps it’s because he’s a Moslem and doesn’t like to see us drink. Anyhow, at least it’s warm in here.”

While I spoke, the old man pulled across the flap of the awning and closed it. On a small wooden box I saw there were two glasses and a water jug. I poured *arak* into both glasses. I filled them to the brim with water. I handed a glass to Ted. I raised my own glass.

“Here’s to our friendship,” I said.

“I’ll drink to that,” Ted answered. He took a great gulp of *arak* and choked a little.

I produced a tin of cigarettes and we lit up.

“What did you think of your bint last night?” I asked.

“She was all right,” Ted answered.

“Was it the first time?” I asked him.

Ted took a sip of his drink. “Yes,” he said.

“You’ve never been with a girl before?” I asked.

“Not like that,” Ted replied.

I looked at him as he sat on the bunk opposite me, with the glass of *arak* in his hand. It was warm now in the cabin, and he’d undone the top two buttons of his shirt. Even by the light of the oil lamp I could see the softness of his skin. I was almost certain, now, that soon that slender body would be naked in my arms. At that moment I was sure he felt the same about me as I did about him. While he gazed at me, in the light of the smoky lamp, he looked like a boy of fourteen.

“When you were at school,” I said, “there must have been some other boy you were really keen on.”

Ted gave a little laugh. “Yes, there was — to tell you the truth,” he said. “But how did you guess?”

“Did you do anything together?” I asked, ignoring his question.

“Only schoolboy stuff,” Ted answered.

“And since then?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Ted said. “I’ve never had the chance — until last night, that is.”

For a while we were both silent. I could hear the ripples of water lapping against the side of the boat. I filled up both our glasses.

“It’s close in here,” I said, and I unbuttoned my shirt. “Do you ever miss that boy?”

Through the murk of the cabin I could see Ted gazing at me. “What boy?” he asked.

“The boy at school you were keen on,” I answered.

“No,” Ted answered. “Why should I?”

“On the boat coming out here,” I said, “didn’t anyone try anything with you?”

“One did,” Ted answered. “But he’s not likely to try that again in a hurry.”

Outside I heard the old man shout out something. I heard the creak of the sail.

“Drink up,” I said to Ted.

“What’s the hurry?” he asked, and stretched himself out on his bunk.

“Come on,” I said. “Let’s drink up. I think we’re turning back.”

Ted laughed. “Do you want to make me drunk?” he asked.

I was glad he’d laughed. I wanted our first moment of love-making to be something happy — something neither of us would regret. For that’s the way it should be, without any fear and without any guilt.

“Of course I want to make you drunk,” I answered. “I want to get you as keen for it as you were last night.”

“You don’t want to go back to that place, do you?” Ted asked.

“No,” I said. “There’s no need to.”

I could see that Ted was staring at me in a bewildered kind of way. But surely he must have understood by now.

“There’s no need to,” I repeated.

Then I leaned over to the oil lamp and blew it out. The moonlight outside came in through small slits in the canvas. Within a few seconds my eyes had got used to the half-darkness. I could see that Ted was still stretched out on his bunk. I moved over to him. I leaned down and put my right hand on his shoulder. He didn’t move. With my left hand I began to unfasten the remaining buttons of his shirt. Ted still didn’t move. I slid my hand under his shirt, I felt the warm skin of his shoulders. He was still lying on his bunk without making a single movement. I took my hands out of his shirt and unfastened his belt. I could hear that he had begun to breathe quickly. Gently I slid his trousers down from his narrow thighs. Then I lowered myself down on to the bunk beside him and pressed his warm body against mine. I began to kiss the skin of his cheeks and his smooth forehead — and then, very gently, his lips — the lips on which my eyes had fixed so many times. I

moved my right hand down to his groin. Suddenly, with a violent heave of his body, he pushed me away from him and struggled up from the bunk. Rapidly he tugged his trousers up around his waist and buttoned his shirt. At first I thought that he had drunk too much *arak* and was going to be sick. Then I felt the thud of his fist striking wildly against my jaw. I shot out a hand to hold him off me. Sweeping over me, I felt a rage of disappointment and bitterness so terrible that I think I could have killed him.

“Don’t you dare hit me,” I said to him quietly. Then I gave him a violent push that sent him reeling back on to his bunk.

I managed to find the bottle of *arak*. I gulped the rest of it down neat. As I stood there with the *arak* burning in my throat his words stabbed out of the darkness at me like some Dervish dagger.

“You rotten bastard,” he said. “You dirty fucking bugger. You’re filth. That’s all you are, filth. George warned me that you were a rotten bloody nance. But I wouldn’t believe him.”

“Get out,” I said. “Get out before I kill you.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I wouldn’t stay in this stinking hole with you for a minute longer.”

He tugged at his clothes to make sure they were in order and hurled himself towards the entrance through which we’d come. He snatched and clawed frantically at the flap of the canvas. Then he managed to get it open. He stumbled out on to the deck. I fell back on to my bunk and sat, with my head in my hands, retching violently. I felt bitter and angry and desperately disappointed.

When I came out of the cabin, Ted was sitting on a sack beside the old man. He wouldn’t even look at me. I clambered forward. The breeze was steady. In the prow the boy was crouched beside a coil of rope. I sat down in the only space there was — beside him. The boy glanced at me and smiled. I turned away from him because I didn’t want him to see my wretchedness. The *felucca* was gliding smoothly along the dark river. The lights from the houses on the banks were reflected in it as if it were a mirror. I took out my tin of cigarettes and handed it to the boy. He smiled again and took one eagerly. We lit our cigarettes. We smoked in silence.

Presently I began to look at the boy. He was light-skinned and slight in build. When he stood up to adjust the sail-ropes his movements beneath his *galabieh* were firm and graceful. He came back and sat down beside me. I

noticed that his head was set very delicately on his shoulders. There was a smooth hollow of flesh below his neck where it joined his chest. Once again, the boy turned and smiled. This time I gazed steadily at him. His eyes were very dark and wide-set. Perhaps it was the long lashes which made his gaze look so gentle. But there was now something soft and yielding in his expression. The *felucca* moved along the river in silence. The boy threw away his cigarette. For an instant he was motionless, still watching my eyes as if he expected an order. Then he stretched out his hand and took hold of mine. His hand seemed to burn my skin. I didn't move, neither did I withdraw my hand; I suppose I was still thinking about Ted. Then, very gently, the boy drew my hand down to his ankle and pulled it gently up his leg beneath his *galabieh* until it reached his thighs. His skin was smoother than any I had ever touched. He was no longer smiling. He was staring at me solemnly. Then he pulled my hand and placed it over his groin. I could feel the tautness of him throbbing against the palm of my hand.

We were approaching the landing stage. I moved my hand away from him.

"*Gib felus,*" he said. "Give *baksheesh* to the old man. Then I can come with you."

I walked back aft. My heart was pounding. I wanted the boy, if only because I felt that somehow he could make me forget about Ted. But I was afraid of some trap.

When we tied up, Ted thrust his half-share of our expenses into my hand without a word and walked off. I paid the old man. Then I added a large tip. I was all right for money because I had almost all my army back-pay. For an instant the old man looked surprised. Then the boy came up to him and spoke hurriedly in Arabic. The old man gave me a vicious leer, so I could guess what the boy had told him. But I didn't mind. The boy helped me on to the landing-stage. The old man gave us a wave of his hand and we walked off. By that time I really didn't care what happened.

"*Mush bayid,*" the boy told me. "It's not far."

I followed him along a series of narrow alleys which twisted like serpents. I wondered if I was heading into some carefully planned ambush, but there was something about the boy's presence and the way he looked up at me now and then which made me feel that he liked me.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Talaat," he replied.

“Talaat, where are we going?” I asked him.

“To the *hammam*,” he answered. “The man there is my friend.”

Then I remembered hearing that Cairo was dotted with these Turkish baths — some of them quite large buildings, some of them where desires of almost any kind could be satisfied. Presently we turned left into a very narrow alley. A faint light was shining at the end of it. By its glow I could see a large building. There was no way out of the alley as the end of it was stopped up by this huge house. Once again I wondered if this was the moment when they would try to rob me. Then we walked up to a newly-painted door. Talaat pulled the bell vigorously several times.

“This is the *hammam* of my friend,” he told me.

Talaat spoke partly in Arabic and partly in English which I suppose he’d picked up from various tourists who’d hired the *felucca*. Presently, the usual slot in the door was pulled back and an eye peered out at us. Talaat spoke quickly in Arabic. There was a sound of bolts being pulled back. The door was opened. We walked in and the door was quickly closed behind us. My first impression was of an overwhelmingly warm dampness which seemed to fill the whole anteroom in which we were standing. Then I observed the man who’d opened the door to us. He was immensely fat. The old expression “As broad as he was long” might almost have been applied to him. His flabby cheeks quivered as he smiled at little Talaat. Then he bowed to me.

“*Tfaddal, ya Effendi*,” he said.

“Give him some money now,” Talaat said.

“How much?” I asked.

“Show me your money,” Talaat ordered.

I handed out a few piastre notes. Talaat took three of them and gave them to the fat man who seemed satisfied. He now opened two doors which led into a vast, circular, dimly-lit room surrounded by cubicles. The rush of heat was like the blast of a furnace. For an instant I couldn’t breathe. I started to cough. Talaat noticed this and laughed. The fat man was holding a key with a number written on it. He gave the key to Talaat. On a stone slab at the end of the room I could see about twelve naked men lying flat and almost motionless. Some of them were being massaged by younger boys. Others were asleep, wound up in cotton sheets. Talaat walked to a cubicle on the left and opened the door with the key. I followed him into the small room. The cubicle was lit by a small oil lamp. In it were a wide canvas-covered bunk, a small wooden stool, and three wooden pegs stuck into the streaming wall. I

was wearing the half-military hospital uniform. Talaat took off my jacket, hung it on one of the pegs, and gestured to me to take off all my clothes. Then he went out, shutting the door behind him.

Once I'd stripped I found I began to sweat less. I lay on the bunk, wondering. Then the door opened and Talaat reappeared. He was carrying a bowl of hot water, a cake of soap and a scrubbing brush. Over his arm were two towels. He put the bowl down on the stool. Then he slipped off his *galabieh* and for the first time I saw him naked. His body was even more graceful and lovely than I'd imagined. For an instant he stood there with his hands resting on his lean buttocks watching me. His body was hairless. His gleaming skin was firm and smooth. As he stood there, motionless, the shape of his body was so clear and the limbs were so polished that in the dim light he might have been a bronze statue.

Suddenly, he grinned and with his surprisingly strong arms turned me on to my stomach. Very gently, he began to scrub my back. I tried to lie still but I was quivering with excitement. When he had finished he turned me so that I was facing him. He dipped his hands into the hot water and rubbed them with soap. Then he began washing me. He started with the hair of my head, then my neck. Soon he was washing my shoulders and next my chest, till, at last, his small hands reached the stiffness of my groin. Talaat's hands were gentle and soft and expert. When he saw that I could bear the tension no longer, he stopped and lay down beside me. Then I turned round and drew him towards me and pulled him on to me as if he were a glove. As I began to move he turned his neck round and his lips joined themselves to mine.

A few minutes later we were lying warm and sweating, clasped in each other's arms. I knew it was getting late. I knew I would have trouble getting back into the Sick-leave Camp, I didn't care. I was happier than I had ever been in my life. For once I wanted nothing in the world more than what I held firmly pressed against me in that small fetid cubicle.

After a while his right arm began to stroke me, and soon we were making love again. But this time his movements were different and more intimate. I had a feeling that he was giving himself to me in a way that he had never done with a man before. When we had finished, he kissed me on the lips and signed to me to put on my clothes.

"*Bokra — essaa kam?* What time tonight?" he asked.

I thought quickly. If I went out before tea I could be there at six.

"Towards sunset," I told him, and he nodded.

On the way back from the *hammam* he made me memorise the streets so that I could find it again.

I was afraid that when I got back to the Camp Ted might have been a fool and told everyone that I'd tried it on with him. But as soon as I got into the ward I was greeted as cheerfully as usual. I realised that Ted had had the sense to keep quiet.

The following day I arrived at the *hammam* soon after six. The fat man answered the door and grinned at me. He jerked his head towards the main Turkish bath.

"Your friend is in there already," he said.

He gave me a spare key and pointed to the cubicle. I unlocked the door. Talaat was lying asleep on the bunk, curled up like a child. As soon as I came in, he sprang up and flung his arms around me. He almost tore off my clothes. Within a few minutes we were making love again.

Perhaps love gives us some extra insight. Though Talaat's love-making was as exciting as ever, I felt there was something worrying him. Later, as we lay in each other's arms, I tried to find out about him. He was called Talaat because he was the third born of the family, and *talaata* means three in Arabic. His mother was a Syrian, his father was Egyptian. They lived in Kantara. They were desperately poor, with eleven children. They'd sold Talaat to the old man with the *felucca* for a few hundred piastres. Talaat was virtually the man's slave. He'd come to the *hammam* to meet me without the old man's permission. If the old man had no Customers that day there would be no trouble, for he was in the cabin smoking *hashish*. But if customers came he would be angry.

As Talaat spoke, an idea came into my mind. But it was so fantastic that I instantly dismissed it. However, the thought of the old man's anger disturbed me. So I gave Talaat the present of money I'd brought him and eventually persuaded him to accept it.

"*Bokra*," I asked. "Tomorrow?"

Talaat nodded. "Do not fear," he said. "I will be here."

As I walked back to the Sick-leave Camp I realised that like an idiot I had forgotten that at four o'clock the following day there was to be a sick parade, which always took ages. I was now afraid I'd arrive late for our meeting.

That afternoon, in the hot sunshine, we stood outside the Medical Officer's tent. By persuasion, and a little cunning, I'd managed to be sixth in the queue. When I got into the tent the Chief Medical Officer asked me to strip. He examined me all over for crabs or lice or venereal disease. Then he glanced at my medical chart. He took out his stethoscope and made me take deep breaths in and out. He listened to my chest and to my back longer than he'd ever done before. When he'd finished he looked grim. "You won't do," he said. "We can't treat you here. You'll have to be invalided home."

Hurriedly he wrote out a chit. "Give this to the Camp Adjutant," he said. "He'll make the necessary arrangements."

I decided I'd delay handing in the chit till the following day. I now realised that my plan might work. At any rate, I was set on trying it. I unlocked the tin box I kept under my palliase. I took out a quarter of the money in it. I began to walk down towards the Medina, to the *hammam*. Perhaps it was what the Medical Officer had told me, or perhaps it was because I was hurrying — I don't know — but the pain in my chest which had been hurting me on and off during the last month now started to cause me real distress. I reached the *hammam* at about half past six. As usual the fat man opened the door to me.

"Your little friend is there," he said to me. But for some reason he looked upset.

I hurried to the cubicle. Talaat was lying naked and flat on his back. But I noticed that he'd tucked his *galabieh* beneath him. He smiled and stretched out his arms when I came in, but he didn't get up from the bed. I bent down and kissed him. He drew my mouth to his lips. For a while we kissed each other. Then Talaat pointed to the three wooden hooks. I stripped off my clothes and hung them up. I lay down beside him on the bunk. I kissed his head, his forehead, his eyes and his lips, while my hand slid down his slender body. Suddenly I felt a desire so intense that I couldn't wait any longer. I pulled him on to his side. At that moment I gaped in horror. From the calves of his legs right up to his buttocks and back until they reached his shoulders ran the thin red lines of a whip. In places the flesh was cut and blood was oozing out. Now I knew why he was lying on his *galabieh* — he didn't want to stain the bunk.

"Who did it?" I asked. Even as I put the question I knew the answer.

"My Master." the boy replied. "The old man. He missed three people who wanted to go out in the *felucca*, because I wasn't there to hoist the sail. When

he is angry my Master is a *wahad shaitan* — a cruel devil.” Talaat tried to smile. “I can still make love to you,” he said, “but in a different way.”

I shook my head. I still lay beside him, stroking his cheek, while I told him my plan. Presently I asked him if he would agree to it. I told him I was going to be invalided back to England in a big ship. I told him I would get an army pension. I told him that with bribery I was almost sure I could get him on board in the steerage. I explained that I’d learnt carpentry at the school I’d been sent to, I was clever with my hands. With the little capital I’d got, I believed we could set up together in a carpentry shop.

I went to my trouser-pocket, I took out the money I’d drawn from my box, I gave it to him.

“I don’t want you to go back to that *felucca* ever again,” I said. “Can you find a room somewhere in the town?”

The boy looked at the notes and nodded.

“Can we trust the fat man who owns this *hammam*?” I asked him.

“*Aiwa*,” the boy said. “Certainly. Very much.”

“So at least we can meet here every evening.”

“*Na’am*,” he replied. “Surely.”

“Would you like to come to England with me?” I asked. For an instant the boy pressed his lips against my shoulder. “*Aiwa*,” he said. “*Ana ahebak ketir*. I love you very much.”

“I will tell you when my ship’s due to sail and what you must do,” I told him.

Talaat took my head and pressed it against his chest.

“You are now my Master,” he said. “I do whatever you order me to do.”

Of course it was a great idea. But like most ideas that have seemed great to me in life I soon realised that it wasn’t going to be as simple as all that. I remembered that on the way out, when we’d stopped at Malta to collect some supplies, there had been two gangways — one for the passengers and the other for the troops and the crew. Each gangway had two guards mounted on it. Those of the crew who’d been allowed ashore had been issued with special passes which they had to present when they came back on board. The ship on which I was due to be invalided back had come from Bombay. It was manned by Lascars. My great hope was to get hold of some Lascar and to bribe him to give up his boarding pass so that Talaat could use it to get on to the ship. On the journey from Cairo to Port Said I would be on the troop-train, so I’d have

to arrange for Talaat to get to the harbour separately. I'd also have to arrange some meeting place.

All of this, in due course, I managed to organise. But even on the train I began to have doubts. I knew that I could be wonderfully happy with Talaat. But I wondered how he'd take to life in England. As I've said, he spoke very little English. He'd be in a strange land without any friends except me.

Talaat and I met in Port Said in a cafe close to the station. I told him to wait for me there while I went in search of some Lascar to bribe. Then my troubles began. The first was that only a handful of Lascars had been allowed ashore. None of the ones I approached — when at last, in a mixture of English and bad Arabic, I'd made them understand what I'd wanted — was willing to be landed in Egypt without any papers or hope of support. They were all paid a puny wage. But at least their jobs were safe, and on board they had free food and lodging. I walked down to look at the ship. I'd only got another hour before I was due to embark. Two gangplanks had been let down. There was a guard mounted on each of them — examining the boarding pass of each passenger or sailor. Suddenly I realised that my idea had been useless. I went back to the cafe. I sat down beside Talaat. By now I'd only got half an hour left. It took me every minute of that to explain the only sensible plan I could now think of. I told him that I'd go back to England where — the doctors had told me — I was certain to be invalided out of the army.

I'd be a civilian. I'd be free to move as I pleased. As soon as I was fit, I'd get a job as a steward on a ship sailing to Egypt.

I gave Talaat half of the money I'd got left. I told him he must get himself apprenticed as a carpenter to some reliable Egyptian. He must leave his address with the fat man at the Turkish bath. Then, finally, I promised that I'd be back within six months.

Talaat listened to me solemnly.

"Do you promise?" he asked me after a pause. "Do you promise in the name of Allah you will come back to me?"

"I swear it," I answered.

Talaat looked keenly into my eyes. Slowly he nodded his head.

"Yes," he said — almost to himself. "I trust you. I know that, if you can, you will come back to me." Then, for a moment, he paused. "*Ana ahebak ketirawi*" he said. "I love you very much. I will think of you every hour of the day."

When I saw the tears in his eyes, I felt a sudden surge of powerlessness as I remembered that I was only an unimportant little trooper — with not much money left. If I'd been rich or if I'd been an officer I'm sure that I could have got that boy on board as my servant. But, as things stood, there was nothing I could do beyond keeping my promise to him and coming back to Egypt to live with him.

I wanted to hold Talaat close to me and to kiss him when I said goodbye. But the cafe was crowded. Already people were staring at the two of us. I think Talaat was also aware of this. After I'd paid the bill, he pressed my hand under the stained table cloth. Then he got up from his chair.

“Allah *yisalmak*,” he said. “May God bless you. May he send you back very soon to your little Egyptian friend who loves you very much.”

Then he turned round quickly and walked away. I watched him as he hurried along the hot and dusty street.

I'm too weak to write any more. I know now for certain that I shall never see Talaat again. He had never looked back.