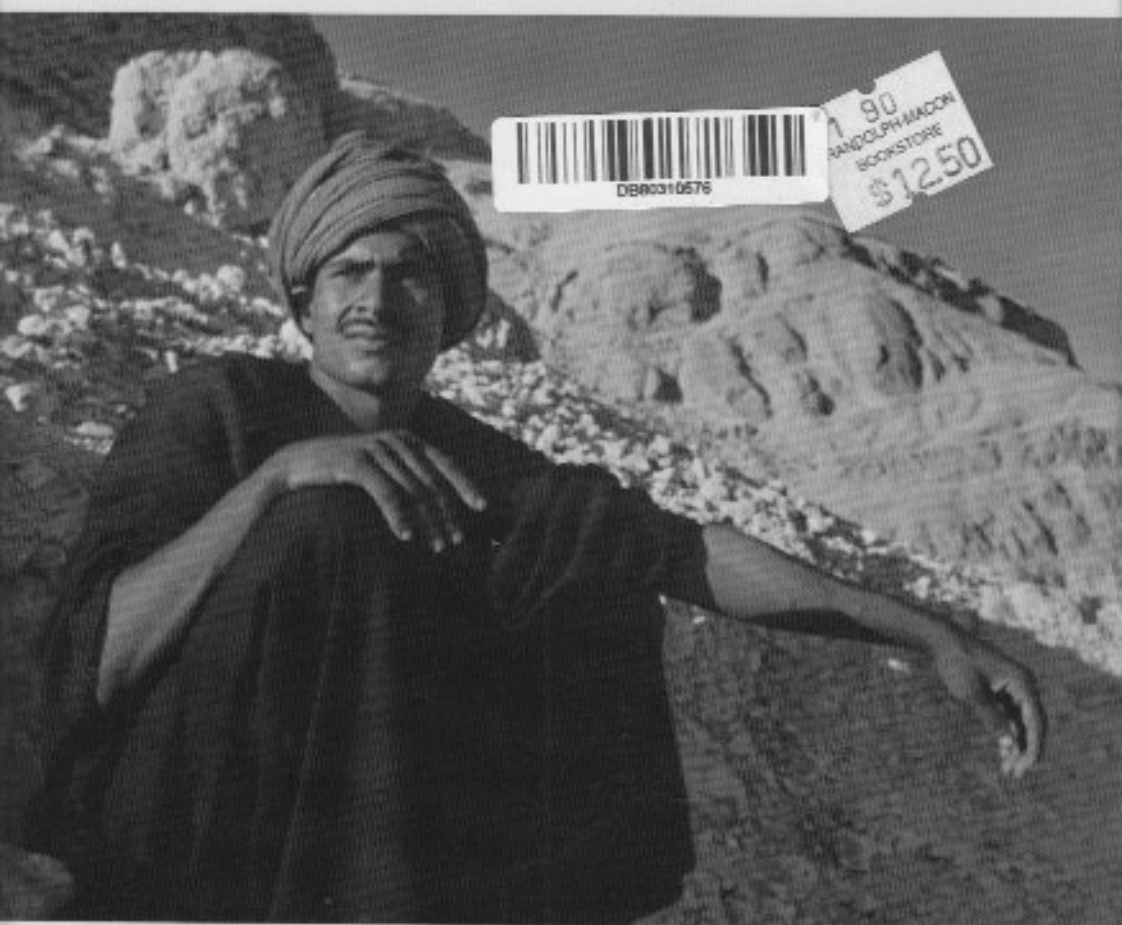


SHAHHAT

An Egyptian



RICHARD CRITCHFIELD

A Prayer to Ammon-Ra

Oh, my God! I demand from you an invitation to Mecca! In any way, by money justly earned, before I die!"

Shahhat listened to his mother's passionate cry with a wry grin, knowing what would come next.

"But I would need to take Shahhat."

"Me? I wouldn't go. Even if it cost nothing."

The grin grew wider. When he was amused, Shahhat had an unusually broad, kind, and gentle grin like that of a small boy, one of those infectious grins to which it is difficult not to respond with one in return.

He laughed, seeing his mother assume the haughty dignity she always wore when someone tried to bring her down to earth.

"If you went to Mecca," he teased her, "you would come back a very pious Moslem. There would be no more drinking or cursing in the house. You would keep us to a narrow path. Who could live with you? Go to Mecca! *Yah salaam!*"

That is how they would go on in the old days. In Ommohamed's presence Shahhat was always humorously combative. She made her demands, arms upraised, luminous eyes flashing in her theatrical way; Shahhat resisted them. She told him, "It is important to dress well, even if you have to go hungry." He habitually went about in the same faded black tunic, so full of holes his hairy chest or brown muscular arms showed through, the same old gray wool scarf wound about his skullcap, his bare, bony feet kicking up the dust; he looked like a beggar.

It is said Egyptian peasant women are old at thirty. In the harsh desert dryness and heat a woman quickly grows thin and plain, and beauty and smiles give way to a resigned, sad expression. Ommohamed was in her mid-forties and still beautiful. It was true her face had begun to



Ommohamed, Shahhat's mother, keeps her fierce pride and romantic hunger for the future despite her harsh and often tragic life.

wrinkle around the eyes when she was amused. And disappointment had etched faint lines about her mouth. Yet she had that strong-boned kind of face that holds its looks no matter what life brings. She had the peculiarly straight nose, oval face, fair complexion, and large lustrous eyes familiar from ancient Egyptian statues and paintings. Strangers were surprised to learn she had borne twenty children, only to see fourteen of them sicken and die. By the time she entered middle age, Ommohamed had suffered many tragic losses; not only were all but six of her children dead, but her parents and grandparents had been carried off in a malaria epidemic—all her family but two brothers were gone.

These losses had taught Ommohamed to be fatalistic; yet she kept, which was part of her fatalism, an unquenched hunger for the future, for

hunger for the future was what kept her going. Most of her hopes were pinned upon Shahhat, the oldest of her three surviving sons and the first to reach manhood.

He did not resemble her. One of the grandfathers of Ommohamed's husband, Abd el Baset, came not from the ancient stock of the hills *fellahs*, but was an Arabian Bedouin, from fierce and wild horse-men who lived out on the sands and rock far east of the Nile, surviving by herding, carrying goods in camel caravans, and, in lean times, by plunder and killing. There were ancient race hatreds between the *fellahs*, as "diggers of the soil," and these desert marauders. But Khalifa, Shahhat's great-grandfather, after a bloody falling-out with his tribe, had come to the valley with a string of camels, sold them for land, married, and settled down. He eventually prospered and bought ten acres, one of which Abd el Baset had inherited from his father.

Khalifa's Bedouin blood had come out in Shahhat. Once fully grown he stood well over six feet with a strong, muscular build, straight as a stick, brown skinned, and slightly hook-nosed. Except for his curly black hair, with its hint of African negro blood, he looked more Arabian than Egyptian; most of the young men in his village of Berat were shorter, more heavily built, and had strong cheekbones, thick noses, and heavy jaws. Among their rugged faces, Shahhat's stood out as singularly sensitive and expressive. His finer, more Semitic features and more excitable temperament, his sense of vengeance that was not without its cruel side, and his love of the desert which most *fellahs* regarded with horror, marked Shahhat as one with the blood of tent dwellers and herdsmen.

Such Arab blood is not uncommon among the Saids, the taller, sturdier, darker-skinned race of Egyptians who inhabit the middle Nile Valley up to Aswan, although many are of pure pharaonic stock. Yet Ommohamed never knew quite what to make of him. Her two younger sons and three daughters resembled her own family in their quieter character and facial appearance. After one of Shahhat's hot-blooded outbursts of temper, she would pray, "Oh, Allah, make my son calm and quiet."

As she grew older Ommohamed held on to the romantic imagination of her girlhood, even as a middle-aged woman beaten down by loss and misfortune. She never asked for pity and dismissed it with withering sarcasm. But she did want it to be accepted by all her neighbors that life had not dealt with her in a fitting fashion; that she was not intended to stay among the poor and humble forever. And with her fierce imagina-

tion—despite the poverty she never escaped—he clung to the belief that if she could only kiss the black stone of Mecca and journey to Mount Arafat to secure Allah's blessing, there was still time for her fortunes to change.

A year before Shahhat was born Ommohamed had once broken the most inviolate principle of Islam: that there is no god but Allah. Since then she had become very pious, strictly following Koranic ritual and observing the moral laws of prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. She feared Shahhat's hot blood and quick temper was Allah's way of punishing her and was secretly obsessed with the belief that only a pilgrimage to Mecca would bring her absolution. What had the good woman done?

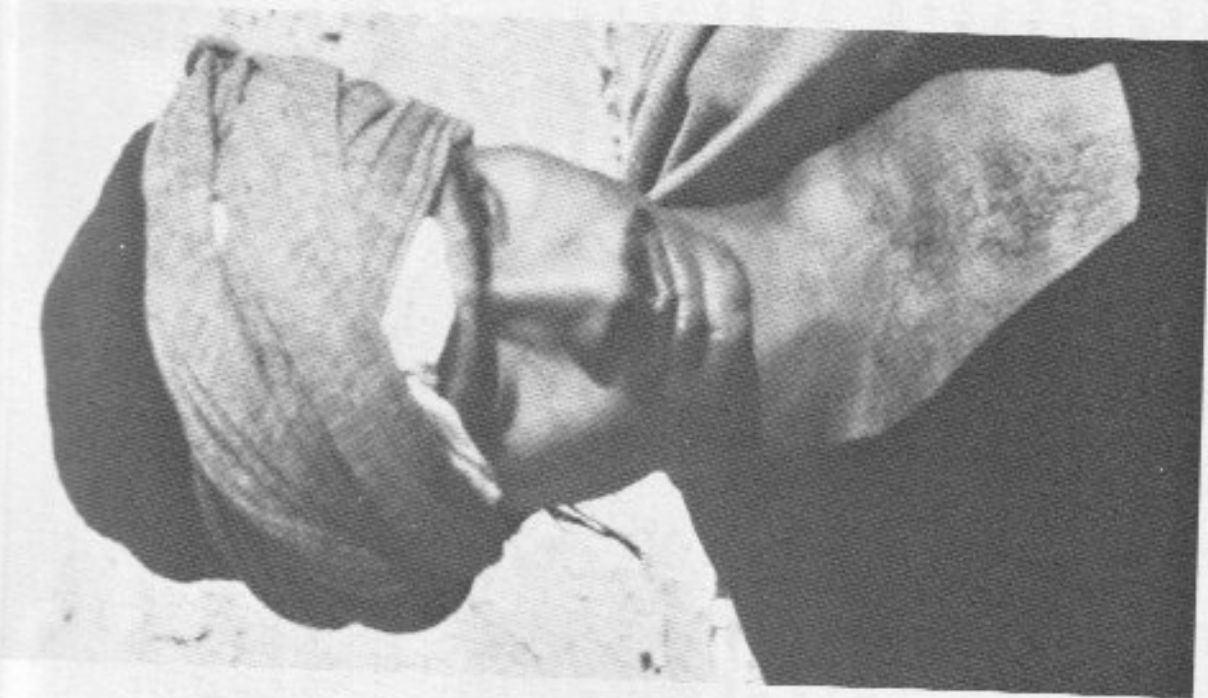
She had prayed to be blessed with a son strong enough to survive to manhood—not to Allah, but to the ancient pharaonic god, Ammon-Ra.

Even twenty years later Ommohamed shuddered to think about it. It was blurred in her memory with the malaria epidemic when she was twelve years old and the sudden terrible fevers that brought death so quickly to so many the men piled the bodies onto carts and dumped them into common pits in the graveyard—no one even had a burial shroud; and her marriage a year later to Abd el Baset, a soldier just home from the army, with black curly hair and broad shoulders, who had to pay for her dowry himself—her nearest surviving relative, an uncle near the Nile, refused to part with more than a humiliating four pounds.

She remembered how her extreme youth, proud ways, and affection for her brothers—especially Ahmed, orphaned at the age of four—right from the first put her on bad terms with Abd el Baset's family, so that he had to build them a separate mudbrick house down on the plain.

How happy the first ten years of marriage had been until her two sons, Jahalan and El Azap, eight and nine, fell ill, and after terrible delirium, died. No one could explain to her why. She herself came to believe that demons sent by Satan had strangled them. She also had two daughters, who were spared, but when she gave birth to two more male babies and they both died the same way, she became terrified that Abd el Baset would divorce her.

She was frantic. She sacrificed sheep at the holiest of shrines. She



Shahhat, whose name is the Arabic word for "beggar," but also means "he who demands of God." His Semitic looks, excitable temperament, and love of the desert reveal his Arab Bedouin blood.

bought amulets and magic written charms, that, burned in a pot of incense, were said to make a wish reality. She consulted sorcerers and *safs* and the most revered old sheikhs. She prayed incessantly to Allah. She even sought the help of Christian Coptic priests, for her whole position as a woman, wife, and mother was at stake.

At last, when all else failed, she crept late one night into the walled grounds of the great stone mortuary temple of Ramses III to appeal to the ancient god.

She was frightened. It was August, the time of year when a howling wind rose each night from the Libyan Desert. The date palms crackled, and men passing the temple walls on their camels and donkeys had covered their faces to avoid swirling dust and sand; familiar neighbors became mysterious, shrouded strangers. High on a temple pylon a watchman's lantern swayed and flickered, casting quivering shadows on the soaring stone walls. Ommohamed waited until he moved out of sight, his robe catching the wind and billowing furiously out behind him as he made his nightly rounds. It was past midnight, the time, Ommohamed thought, when all manner of demons and evil genii were about. She had also heard the temple grounds swarmed with deadly vipers and scorpions after dark.

The house Abd el Baset had built on the land given him by his father lay just outside the temple's high, eastern walls where a Roman fortress and enormous ceremonial gate built by Ramses III to Syrian design faced the village. Ommohamed, like many of her neighbors, had not been far inside the temple grounds before, and now she realized how vast they were. The entire assembly of great, granite buildings, colossal in their proportions, stretched far into the desert. Looming up across a large open space and dwarfing all else, was the mortuary temple of Ramses III with its soaring pylons, court after court, complex of towers and battlements, and the ruins of an imperial palace to one side. This assembly was properly known as Medinet Habu, a designation given by early Christians who built a church inside its high walls in the days of Roman persecution and tried to efface the eroticism of its stone reliefs. The villagers merely called it "the city" and paid it little attention. Save for the occasional busload of foreign tourists, the grounds were deserted except for thousands of pigeons which roosted in the cool shade of its stone walls and circled to darken the sky whenever a hawk appeared.

Few villagers set foot inside the temple grounds by day, let alone at night. It was not just that they feared accusations of theft and a police beating and torture, though Ommohamed had heard the men speak of it.

Nor that the many huge stone idols with heads of cats, jackals, and falcons offended their Islamic sensibilities, though she had heard that, too. Deep in everyone's heart was the feeling there was something deeply, supernaturally, troubling about the temple grounds. Seeing the glow of the watchman's lantern had gone far away, Ommohamed stealthily moved along the shadows of the high walls. She saw they were adorned with symbols of life and procreation, just as Sheikha Daiyi, the village sorceress, had told her. Some were obscene—one entire wall seemed devoted to portraying a procession led by the god of the penis—as if in the ancients' religion the sacred and obscene lay very close together. There were enormous reliefs depicting the pharaoh's victories in war; she saw tongue cuttings, prisoners being crushed beneath chariots, mass decapitations and castrations, with heaps of genitals carved in stone. She saw what neighbors had whispered: in all the temple's homage to death, as the cradle of life, there was a lustful power, a vicious attraction, and Ommohamed remembered gossip that villagers engaged as watchmen soon felt drawn toward it and themselves became filled with lust, just as if this power emanated from the dead stone itself.

In Ommohamed the temple inspired different feelings. She was terrified. The lantern no longer in sight, she left the shadows and hurried through the coarse high grass, dew soaking her skirts and long black cloak. She reached her destination, the sacred pool of Ammon-Ra, which was set deep into the ground within grassy banks and a series of steep stone steps. Looking about to see she was unobserved, Ommohamed slipped down the bank and went about the pool seven times. She remembered not to hurry but to move in the slow measured steps of a ritual recaptured from the ancient friezes in the temple itself, just as Sheikha Daiyi had instructed her.

She moved and swayed, quivering from throat to ankles, now begging Allah to forgive her, now fervently calling upon Ammon-Ra, the Unknown, to help her conceive a son so endowed with the force of life that he would not die as her other sons but would live on to manhood. Round and round she moved, hypnotized by her own whispered invocations, at last collapsing in a panting, trembling heap. Then, fighting back revulsion, she dipped her hands in the slimy black water and drank of it.

She told no one what she had done. When Shahhat was born, in contrition she named him Mohammed, after the holy prophet himself. Then, fearing anything that might attract the Evil Eye of the envious, she began to call him Shahhat.

Shahhat is the Arabic word for *beggar*. In her fear, Ommohamed left him unwashed and shabbily clad. The baby's eyes were extremely filthy, and half a dozen flies were usually buzzing about each eye, unheeded and unmolested. He appeared utterly neglected as his mother tried to conceal from the neighbors and evil genii that her whole life now revolved about him. Even as a small child he was half-angel, half-dévil, forever trodding in the dough if she tried to bake bread, thrusting his little hands into the cooking fire or crawling after beetles, scorpions, and snakes. In terror he would be fatally stung, Ommohamed paid Sheikhā Daiyi to provide the boy with supernatural protection against creeping, crawling creatures; from that day on he could even put a live scorpion on his bare arm and let it move about and nothing would happen. Anxious to be as healthy as possible, Ommohamed did not wean him until he was three.

The word *shahhat* has a second meaning: "he who demands of God." It was fitting.

By sixteen Shahhat was almost fully grown, a muscular strapping youth who could do the work of two men. He was remarkably quick of comprehension, yet neither of his parents thought to send him to the government primary school in the neighboring hamlet of El Kom, open since the 1952 revolution, which had taken place the year Shahhat was born. Few boys from the village attended, and in the experience of Ommohamed and Abd el Baset, Shahhat's six years at the *hattab*, the traditional Moslem school in El Kom, where he learned to read, write, add, subtract, and memorize the Koran, were enough for a boy who would spend his life tilling the soil. As soon as Shahhat was big enough, his father sent him to the fields. Shahhat did not mind; he was proud to do a man's work and accepted it as Allah's will.

Abd el Baset, now in his late forties, gradually turned all the cultivation of the land over to Shahhat. He himself opened a small shop by the temple walls where men gathered to play cards and dominos. There he came to devote his days to drinking and gambling. No longer handsome, Abd el Baset had become a fat, genial man with a large black moustache and a heavy drinker's flushed and bloated face. He was starting to begin each day with a glass or two of date wine and kept steadily put-



Shahhat, the Nile, and the temple of Luxor.

ting it away until nightfall. He was affable and easygoing, and perhaps the most popular man in the village, with a knack for attracting and keeping friends. When his luck held, he made much money at cards. He was a kind and gentle husband and father at home whose sudden bursts of temper—the only evidence of the Bedouin blood he had passed on to Shahhat—ended as quickly as they flared up.

When his luck failed, as it sometimes did, Ommohamed, who had come to love her husband with a fierce, possessive passion, would swallow her considerable pride and send Shahhat into the Luxor market for onions and tomatoes which they would peddle from door to door. Shahhat looked forward to these pre-dawn excursions by donkey to the river and then crossing its swirling waters by ferry just as the wharves of the town began to stir. The heavy, clumsy ferry would leave the bank

and heave through the water so slowly that it was only by the bank receding that Shahhat could tell the ferry was moving. He would hang over the side, watching the river mist rise, shrouded in his scarf and tunic, as most of the passengers were, hunched against the morning chill. These men said little. Scarves wrapped about their faces, their heads sunk forward on their chests, they habitually seemed lost in sleep or meditation. In the dim gray light it seemed to Shahhat as if they were all sitting on some strange aquatic animal, swimming out to a cold, dismal, nightmare country. Then the ferry would swing out to midstream and all too soon was bumping heavily against the landing stage. Shahhat could never get his fill of the dark, cold Nile, murmuring and lapping its banks in the mists of dawn, moving along to he knew not where.

When he returned home, he and Ommohamed would go about the village, crying in long sobbing wails, "Come if you like green onions! Come, people, for Allah, but tomatoes!" Since Ommohamed found this humiliating, Shahhat more often went alone, the onions and tomatoes loaded on his donkey, and then he would speak and laugh with everyone. He was so talkative, light-hearted, and cheerful he was welcomed everywhere, and the women liked to tease him. They would disdainfully handle his vegetables, squawking with mock indignation, "Why so expensive, Shahhat? You are no good!" He in turn, with his wide, infectious grin, would wink and reply in such a loud voice everyone could hear, "*Taiyib bilili?* Okay tonight after dark?" When they reddened, abashed, he would burst into his deep, hoarse laughter; if Shahhat thought something was funny he could go into convulsions until the tears came. He was irreverent, forever parodying the customary salutations so that "good morning" became "black morning" and "If God wills, tomorrow" became in his words, "If God wills tomorrow we are dead."

His neighbors grew used to Shahhat's hot temper. There is a saying that the Saidi *fellah* of Upper Egypt is like a volcano which will erupt when least expected. If someone should be disrespectful of his parents or bully and abuse poor men or children, he could suddenly turn on them, his eyes full of fury and his face and neck crimson with all the muscles strained. Shahhat's anger could be told by his trembling, passionate voice, the fire in his eyes, and the movement of his long, thin hands as he clenched his fists. Yet if he was quick to anger, he was at once affable and good-natured again. If Shahhat felt depressed and sat about as if paralyzed, pensively gazing into space and hardly hearing anybody, all the neighbors would feel gloomy too as if something lively,



Ahmed, Ommohamed's stern younger brother, is Shahhat's idol of what a man should be but also his chief rival for his mother's respect and affection.

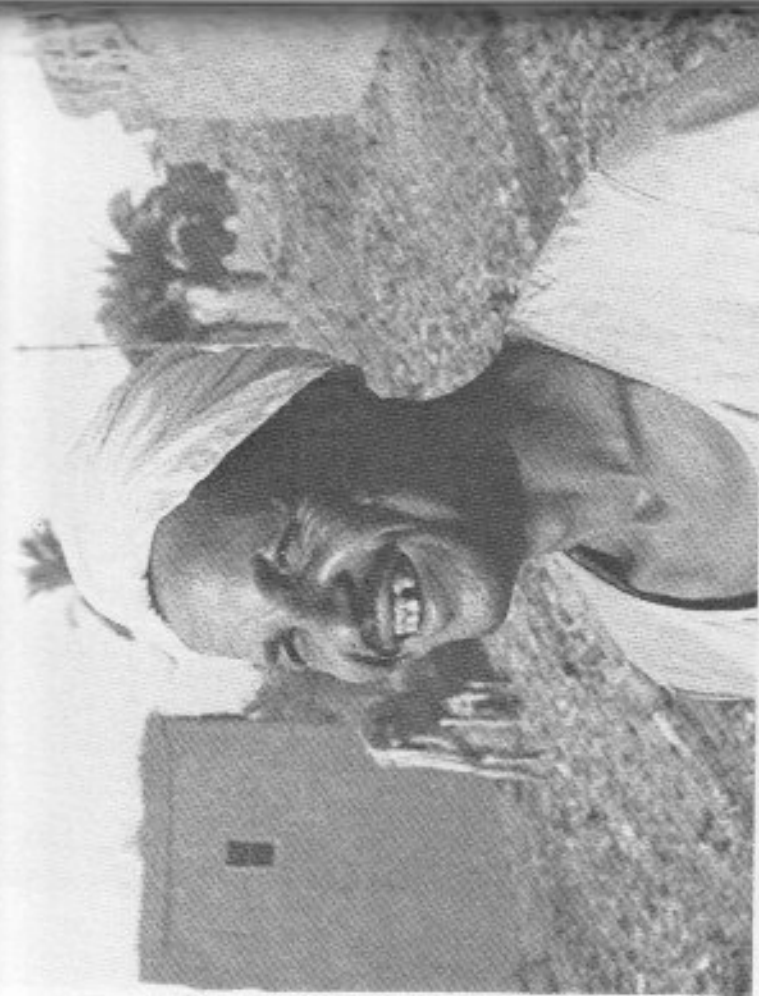
avid, and intense were missing from their day. Like Ommohamed, Shahhat loved to gossip; the characters of his fellow villagers fascinated him, and to describe some daily episode he threw himself into attitudes, changing the expression of his face and his voice. Like his mother he went into great detail, quoting from memory whole descriptions and conversations. As he spoke, his hands, with their long Bedouin fingers, were never at rest; he waved them back and forth, shook a finger in the air,

tion. His whole being at such times seemed to express guilt and confusion as if, in the presence of such a heroic figure, he was ashamed of his own uncouth, garrulous ways. He was also a bit jealous of Ahmed, for Om-mohamed was fiercely maternal toward her younger brother, having raised him from childhood. She would always defend him: "Ahmed never had a chance to play or be a real child. Right from the first he had to be hard and aggressive and take everything by force. He almost never laughed."

Faruk was the opposite; he had a good deal of humor. He was in his mid-forties, a husky, thickset man of medium height whose puffy face, pitted purple cheeks, bloodshot eyes, and wet, open lips gave him away as a confirmed drunkard and voluptuary. Faruk was one of Abd el Baset's favorite drinking cronies, and many a night the two of them would come staggering up to the house, arm in arm, both drunk, and bumping into each other. With one or two more friends they would sit downstairs for hours, passing a bottle around, all talking at once, and loudly interrupting each other. "Oh, my God, what will wine do to a man?" Faruk would moan, pouring himself another glass.

Faruk's association with the family had become close. A year earlier, when Shahhat was fifteen, the last August flood of the Nile had come. The new High Dam at Aswan had stored enough water in Lake Nasser so that the valley could be permanently enclosed with dikes. Water became available the year round for the first time, and three crops a year, as well as such new crops as sugar cane, could be grown. The land of an old feudal estate, Sombat, which had been seized after the 1952 revolution, was finally redistributed. Abd el Baset, as a former soldier, was eligible, and his many cronies among the petty government officials saw to it that his name was put on the list. He was given title to two and a quarter acres in two separate fields at Sombat, a mile from the family's house on the other side of El Kom. This distance made it necessary to form a partnership with someone from El Kom who lived beside the land and could protect the crops.

The land was not given outright. The government retained the power to tell the new owners what and when to plant. It provided water—not always enough or in time, they soon discovered—and credit for seeds, fertilizer, and labor. The government bought a fixed quota of each harvest at a low price. This meant constant dealings with the village agricultural inspector and so much delay, favoritism, and bribery that most of Abd el Baset's neighbors found it profitable to make sharecrop-



Faruk, Shahhat's sharecropper, is something of a drunkard and voluptuary with his own idea of morality.

clenched a fist and beat it against some surface. His neighbors often found it more entertaining to hear Shahhat describe some event than witness it themselves.

After his father, the two men who most influenced Shahhat were his mother's brother, Ahmed, and Abd el Baset's sharecropper, Faruk. They could not have been more unlike.

In spite of his youth—he was still in his late twenties—Ahmed was stern and cold, a humorless, serious man who went his way and disdained idle gossip. He looked remarkably handsome and of great strength, and around him Shahhat's face took on an expression of servile admira-

ping arrangements. A system was worked out whereby a man in El Kom protected the crops, dealt with the inspector, and helped with the ploughing, sowing, watering, weeding, and harvesting in return for a third of each harvest.

At first Abd el Baset cultivated with Taiyar, one of his two sons-in-law, and a shopkeeper and *fellaḥ* from El Kom of some standing. But when his daughter divorced Taiyar and married another man, Abd el Baset replaced Taiyar with Faruk.

Faruk made such sharecropping contracts with seven other *fellaḥeen* and suddenly found himself prospering. He had been a serf on the Sombat estate in his youth and was long accustomed to the utmost poverty. Now he found himself with money for the first time in his life. At first he worked hard, but soon he was hiring other men to look after the crops and deal with the inspector while he himself plunged into every sort of debauchery, drinking heavily, smoking hashish, chasing women, and spending long hours gambling with Abd el Baset. Ommohamed said he looked like the village headman, riding about his donkey and wearing a clean white tunic every day when he should have been out in the fields.

Ommohamed was mortified by the association as Faruk's disolute character was well known. She preferred to cultivate with Taiyar, who was plump, pompous, always went to the mosque on Fridays, and was eminently respectable. When she complained that Faruk might cheat them, Abd el Baset—who was not above striking Ommohamed if he felt it was justified—angrily told her to be still. He himself was satisfied and paid no attention to village gossip as his own reputation for drinking was worse than Faruk's.

Shahhat was grieved to see the Nile's last flood. From the first he distrusted *Nitroḳīma*, the new chemical fertilizer artificially manufactured at Aswan to replace the Nile's lost mineral-rich silt. Until now only land susceptible to the annual flooding and the natural refertilization it brought could be cultivated. Once the high water came in August and the fields were inundated, there was little to do but sow one's wheat, barley, lentils, or maize in November and wait for the April harvest. Now three crops were to be grown each year, even in the scorching summer heat, the field work was unending, and chemical fertilizer had to be used for the first time in the Nile valley.

Shahhat felt frustrated. Left to himself to cultivate his father's acre of ancestral land beside his house, he was content. He used the

methods handed down from the time of the pharaohs, and everything he put his hand to turned out well. On the government-deeded land at Sombat it was different. He had to depend upon Faruk or the inspector for almost everything, and things seldom went as promised. He longed to be independent of anyone.

Then, ever since he had reached puberty, Shahhat found himself with a growing sexual hunger. He was torn between pride in his masculinity and seeing this as a curse, as the village afforded little way of finding satisfaction and relief. Faruk and the men in the fields good-naturedly called him El Tor, "the bull," joked about the size of his penis, and claimed only a donkey would satisfy him. It was a common dilemma among the young men. Few girls were available, and even if they were willing, the social risk of going with one was high. The Koran decreed that a detected adulteress was to be put to death by stoning. Even fornication was punishable by scourging with a hundred lashes. Sodomy also drew the death penalty.

In fact, everything went on, if very secretly. Islamic law required the burden of proof; a charge of adultery needed at least four eye-witnesses. Naturally, detection was rare. The last incident of proven adultery in the village had taken place a few years earlier. The woman's husband, father, and brothers had taken her out into the desert, slit her throat, and left her body to the jackals rather than face a public trial and execution.

The village men took fierce pride in their strength, masculinity, and solidarity; the severe penalty given a woman caught in adultery assuaged this pride, as did some men's treatment of their wives, never addressing them as more than "*Yak mara!* Woman!" and forever putting them down. This same pride led to a drive to reduce competing males to lesser status through domination, sadism, and even sodomy; dominance was everything. Sodomy with another male or an animal was treated as a mere peccadillo.

Shahhat was anguished when some small boys one night came upon himself and a friend, El Azap, out in a tall maize field competing to "see who was the strongest" with a female donkey. Faruk and the others, when they heard about it, roared with laughter and took it as proof of Shahhat's sexual prowess. The prevalence of sodomy deeply mortified the village women. Ommohamed, prepared to think the worst of Faruk, would not have been surprised if copulation with boys or animals numbered among his other follies; she told Abd el Baset he was a bad influence on her son. In truth Faruk had several times taken Shah-

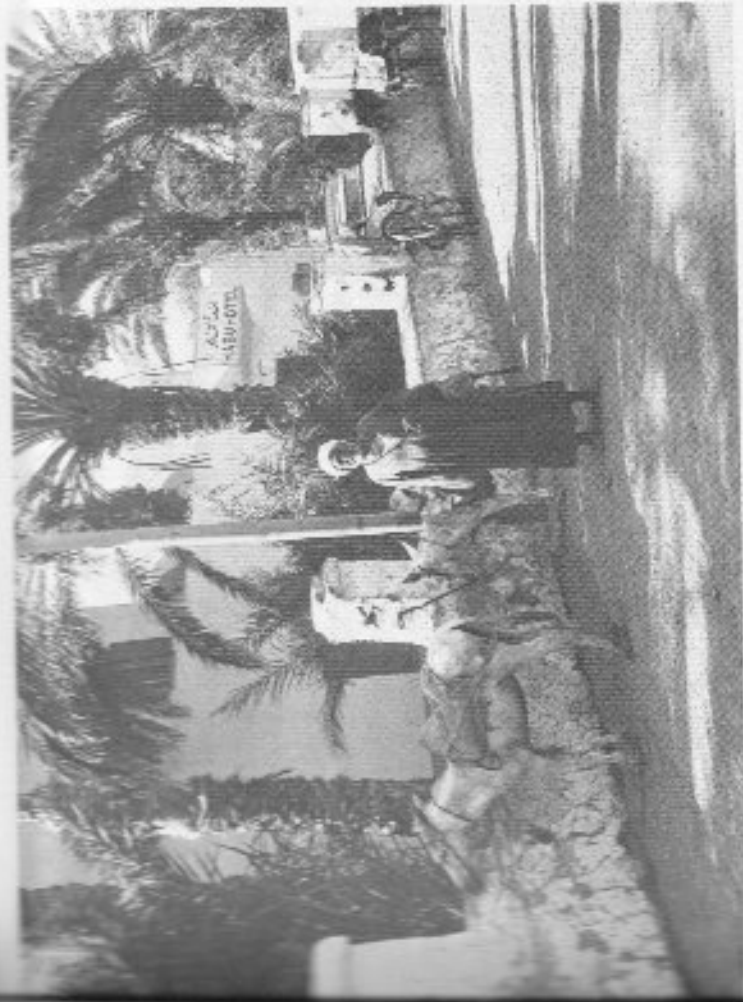
hat with him to the house of an old widow with two daughters who engaged in prostitution, where Shabbat had his first woman. But, though he had no fear of death, Shabbat had an exaggerated terror of all illness, and when he learned how many men went to this house, he was afraid to go back.

On most matters of sex the village women spoke as openly and unblushingly as the men. Ommohamed and her friends discussed the most intimate details of their married lives with each other. Young girls grew up with a knowledge of everything and experience of nothing. This atmosphere of pagan sensuality combined with the threat of severe Islamic punishment created a peculiar air of tolerance mixed with tension in the village. Everything went provided it was done discreetly; whispered gossip provided a welcome distraction and entertainment, but public exposure demanded the harshest condemnation.

If Abd el Baset, Ahmed, and Faruk, each in different ways, suggested to Shabbat how a man might live, his mother peopled his world with villains. These were the relatives of Abd el Baset—his older sister, Fatnah, and two cousins, Sobhy and Hagg Ali. Down through the years Ommohamed had never been able to visit them nor speak of them without a note of anger or injury.

As Shabbat had grown up, he had become accustomed to hearing her tell of their endless intrigues against herself and his father. In middle age Ommohamed took to smoking a water pipe in the evenings, and then she would let her romantic imagination portray her husband's family in the most dramatic shades of black and white. In her version Fatnah was selfish and grasping, and even when Ommohamed had been a young bride, had objected if she took food home to Ahmed. But the worst villains came to be Sobhy and Hagg Ali, who were pictured as little more than robbers of widows and orphans. Their villainy consisted of countless plots to cheat or humiliate herself and Abd el Baset.

She never succeeded in making the details clear, and Shabbat did not know the truth of it. Ommohamed believed her stories implicitly, and she was an honest woman, honest in her temptation to dramatize everything that had happened to her. Even Faruk became a paragon of virtue compared to the cousins. Evidently Faruk liked Ommohamed,



Old Yusef, the village bore, peddles limes and lemons to tourists in front of the Habu Hotel. Shabbat's house is nearby, reached by a narrow lane behind the hotel.

as he behaved freely in her presence and even shared a water pipe with her. For all her complaints, Ommohamed could forgive Faruk his follies; just as he, she had a good deal of humor.

The cousins were another matter. It was certainly true that both of them had grown mysteriously rich in a short time, and it was whispered about that the money had come from robbing pharaonic tombs; but nothing had ever been proved, and indeed, both of them were on familiar terms with the police inspector.

Sobhy, the youngest of the two who was still in his thirties, had been a fishmonger. Overnight he had found the money to build the village inn, which was situated not far from Abd el Baset's house across

from the great entrance gate of Medinet Habu, the assembly of temples. Even Ommohamed would admit that Sobhy had not been a bad lot in the days he sold fish. But soon his inn, which he called the Habu Hotel, was attracting the worst scoundrels and swindlers on the Nile's west bank. Once an innkeeper, Sobhy grew inordinately fat and bad-tempered. He gave free liquor to the police inspector and was not above informing on his neighbors out of spite. He seemed to go out of his way to make enemies; he boasted that he never went outside without a revolver in his pocket. At the inn he was surrounded from morning to night by a crowd of toadies and flatterers; idlers whom he fed and gave free drinks or cigarettes to now and then. These always hastened to light his cigarettes with a show of servility and to agree with all he said.

Hagg Ali was sometimes part of this unwholesome entourage, but he traveled a great deal to Cairo, hatching up some nefarious scheme or other. He was a man of about fifty with cunning, calculating eyes, a hawk nose, wrinkled face, and an ingratiating, obsequious manner. He always had a watchful look as if he were perpetually reconnoitering and spying; he was as resourceful as a fox and knew how to use people at their expense.

During thirty years of quarrels with Fatah, Sobhy, and Hagg Ali, Ommohamed sometimes tried to make peace, partly out of calculation, for all of them had money, but really because she did not feel it right for Shabbat and his two younger brothers to live unreconciled with their blood relations. Sobhy and Hagg Ali, at least—for Ommohamed had not seen Fatah for many years—seemed to share this feeling and at times the quarrels would be formally healed for a while, before erupting again over a new issue. Abd el Baset, in his affable way, preserved his peace at home by always siding with his wife.

Indeed their house had been built to get away from his family, a move frustrated when Sobhy had opened his inn practically next door. This house, reached by a short twisting lane from the temple road, Abd el Baset himself had made of unbaked mud bricks; it stood two stories high and was roofed with palm branches and palm leaves and possessed a large pigeon-loft of crude brick, mud and pottery jars on the roof; with its high walls slightly inclining inward in the ancient Egyptian style, this clove-cote gave the house the look of a fortress, just as it would have had in pharaonic times.

A heavy wooden door opened directly into a cool and light front room, as far as strangers ever went. Air was admitted through two small

apertures high on the walls which, like the ceilings, were plastered with gray mud and chopped straw. The tattered remains of scraps of newspapers hung about, as Ommohamed had once pasted some up instead of pictures. Aside from a large wooden bench where Shabbat slept at night, some rolled-up sleeping mats, a few earthen vessels, and Ommohamed's handmill to grind maize, this room was bare—visitors sat either on the bench or the bare ground. Behind was a second room for women, a stable, storeroom, open courtyard, and kitchen; a large oven occupied the kitchen's whole width and was black with soot and flies which buzzed about, annoying and persistent, in spring and fall. An outdoor stairway led to an upstairs room and an open rooftop terrace where the family gathered for its evening meal. This upper room, which housed the family's most prized possessions and where Ommohamed and Abd el Baset slept, was where most family life went on. Two sides were occupied by large sleeping benches covered with clean white counterpanes, a third by a wardrobe with a cracked mirror and a wooden chest of drawers, piled high with a mountain of every conceivable article of clothing or cooking pot.

The upper room had two large windows, one facing the lane and the temple walls and the other looking out over the Ramses Canal and the family's fields behind. Someone was always moving along the leafy canal banks: black-shrouded women or men in white or pastel turbans and tunics, on foot or astride donkeys, schoolboys, herds of sheep, processions of camels, buffaloes going to water, or men coming from the fields with hoes and sickles. To the west the pink, granite, temple ramparts rose above the rooftops and tall swaying palm trees; from here the village looked peaceful and picturesque.

A stranger might find this room shabby and scarred, but to Ommohamed it held shadows as well as substance. For years Shabbat did not know how the mirror on the wardrobe, part of his mother's dowry, had been cracked. At last Ommohamed told him. She remembered the date clearly as it happened the day Shabbat was weaned. Abd el Baset brought home a plump, fourteen-year-old girl and introduced her as Hasaniya, whom he had just taken as his second wife. In fury Ommohamed had screamed, "No! Choose me or the other! I'll stay with you no more!" and she had hurled a pot of tea at him, breaking the mirror.

Of all her disappointments in life this rankled the most, and Ommohamed hated to even think of it. She had rushed to Sheikha Daiyi who told her, "Do not be afraid. I shall arrange that Abd el Baset is for

you only. Not for the two." The old sorceress had prepared a magic charm, but Ommohamed had not needed it. Abd el Baset caught his young wife stealing money and divorced her and sent her away within eleven days. Years later Ommohamed was coming from the Nile with him when they passed Hasaniya, long since married to another man and living far away. Abd el Baset had asked, "Who is that?" having failed to recognize her. It was the only satisfaction Ommohamed could find from an episode that had wounded her vanity as nothing ever had. Abd el Baset had never been unfaithful, much less considered another marriage, since, though by Islamic custom he was allowed four wives.

Proud in all ways, Ommohamed tried to conceal her superstitious side, but Shabbat knew she favored the bed on the northern wall for here she always had her dreams. She was a great believer in them. Once when he had been ill with fever as a child, she had dreamed she was sailing on the Nile in a *felucca* when she saw Shabbat standing on the western bank. A voice called to her, "*Mas salam, go with peace,*" and Shabbat had come flying through the air and into her arms. When she awoke, he had recovered. Another time she had dreamed she was again sailing on the Nile when the *felucca* landed on the eastern bank near the tomb of a saint named Nubi. When Ommohamed later found such a tomb actually existed, not far from the great temple of Karnak, she prayed to Allah, promising that if she would give birth to another son, she would name him Nubi. When Shabbat's younger brother was born, she took him to the tomb and sacrificed a sheep. Ever since Ommohamed had great faith in dreams, especially if green, the color of the Nile, figured in them.

Midway through his sixteenth year, Shabbat started getting into trouble. Strangers would come to the house to complain to Ommohamed, "Shabbat made a fight with my son. Your boy is crazy," or "Shabbat bit my hand. I'll have to go to the doctor for treatment and who is to pay?"

Then she caught him taking eggs from the storeroom. She discovered some grain was also gone. She did not know the village boys all did this, exchanging it for hashish, which they secretly smoked in the fields.

Abd el Baset was at a loss what to do. He had never had to punish his son. As a boy Shabbat would sometimes take meat set aside for his father and give it to his friends. Ommohamed might shriek, "*Yah wahid!* Oh, my God, now Abd el Baset will divorce me and you will be the cause!" but his father would only laugh and tell her, "If Shabbat eats meat, my belly is full." Ommohamed later told Shabbat, "When you were a small boy, I never saw your father angry with you. He never laid a hand on you. Perhaps it was a mistake." In turn, Shabbat was fiercely loyal to his father. When he sold onions and tomatoes he refused to turn all his earnings over to Ommohamed, but saved some amount for Abd el Baset despite her protests, "Please don't give it to him. You know your father spends easily."

Then Abd el Baset caught Shabbat red-handed trying to carry away a full sack of grain. Forced to punish him at last, Abd el Baset tied his son in the stable and left him there for a day, saying, "If you are going to act like a donkey you can share the same stall." When her husband left the house, Ommohamed secretly brought Shabbat food and tea.

They suspected he was also drinking but had no proof until one night Shabbat and his friend, El Azap, went across the river to Luxor and bought a large bottle of "French brandy," downing it between them. They staggered drunkenly about the town, insulting everyone they met, challenging strangers to fights, and creating such a nuisance they were chased by the police. El Azap was caught, slapped about, and thrown into the police station's stable to sober up overnight. Shabbat escaped into the darkness of the trees beside the Luxor temple but fell into an open sewer. He washed himself and his clothes in the Nile. But when he presented himself at the door of his uncle Ahmed's house on the western bank, still drunk, soaking wet, and reeking of the sewer, a foolish grin on his face, Ahmed cursed him, slapped his face and sent him home in a clean tunic of his own.

When Abd el Baset heard about this escapade, he went to fetch a heavy stick. Shabbat fled the house and caught a ride in a horsecart; he slept off the liquor's effect and woke up to find himself in Dandara, a river town some sixty kilometers away. Hungry, without money, and stubbornly defiant, he walked home all the way, taking two days and eating dates and drinking water from canals. He arrived home with his feet so badly swollen and with such a pathetic, exhausted expression on his face, Abd el Baset saw he had punished himself enough and had not the heart to do more.

Ommohamed secretly feared that Shahhat's growing wildness was Allah's way of punishing her for praying to the ancient god and drinking from the pharaoh's sacred pool so long ago. She tried to persuade herself that the temples were only stone and had no power, that the past was dead. But in her superstitious heart she was frightened it would obtrude itself into the present and was not entirely to be ejected.

Suniya

ONE DAY SHAHHAT came home to announce he planned to marry Suniya, a pretty girl who lived just down the canal. Ommohamed and Abd el Baset were stunned. It was not just that they felt Shahhat at sixteen was too young, though most youths waited to marry in their twenties. Their real objection was that Suniya belonged to the despised Jamasah tribe, the traditional water carriers of Upper Egypt. The Jamasahs, thirteen hundred years before, had once come late to a gathering called by the Prophet Mohammed. According to Upper Egyptian belief, he had condemned them so harshly that, ever since, their descendants had suffered discrimination and social ostracism from orthodox Moslems along the Upper Nile.

Her son's marriage to a Jamasah was unthinkable to Ommohamed. When Shahhat declared his intention, she threw up her hands and cried, "No, no, my son! Suniya is from a bad family. The Jamasahs publicly scorned the holy Prophet. They are crafty and dishonest. How could we hold up our heads?"

Ommohamed had nothing against Suniya herself and indeed was fond of her. The girl and Shahhat had grown up side by side, often play-

ing together as children. Now fourteen, Suniya was a gentle little being, delicate but sturdy, with pretty, soft features and a skin tanned by constant exposure to the sun. The expressions of her eyes were still those of a child, trusting and inquisitive, and she always smiled in a sad, timid way. She was quite young—a girl with an undeveloped figure—yet of a marriageable age. She was decidedly pleasing, and had she been from any other family, Ommohamed would have quickly given her consent and blessing. She was aware that Shahhat had matured early and might settle down if he had a wife.

Instead she pressed Abd el Baset to forbid the marriage. "It would be terrible for our family to take anyone from the Jamasah as a wife," she told her husband. "Shahhat is very young. He does not understand such things."

One of the village *gaffirs* or constables, a man named Salem, had married a Jamasah. Salem was a direct descendant of their hamlet's namesake, Lohlah, yet he and his family were now virtual outcasts. He cultivated five acres just south of the temple grounds, and, in a house on the edge of the desert, he and his wife and six children lived far from their neighbors. Neither the Jamasahs nor the other villagers had much to do with them. Salem, now nearing fifty, was a taciturn, lonely man. Ommohamed did not want such a fate for her son.

Abd el Baset agreed with his wife, and they determined to break up the romance. Everyone was told to try and persuade Shahhat marriage with a Jamasah could only lead to a lifetime of regret.

By now Shahhat was cultivating the acre of land Abd el Baset had inherited from his father by himself; it lay just between the row of walled houses and gardens in Lohlah hamlet and the new canal. Shahhat was endowed with considerable strength, and when he ploughed, leaning heavily on the shaft with his large hands and calling "*Hal!*" and "*Hoorah!*" to direct his pair of cows, for he used no bridle, he seemed to cut open the soil by the sheer force of his will. When he mowed clover, bending from the waist and not squatting as did the weaker men, he swiftly flashed his sickle without stopping a minute, the firm muscles of his shoulders rising and falling like levers.

Shahhat watered this land with an ancient well sweep, called a *shadaf*; a broad, copper bucket was suspended from one end while a large lump of dried mud served as a counter-poise at the other. This was an extremely laborious task, demanding that he dip, lift, and pour thousands of buckets each day. It needed strong rhythm, arms and thighs like iron,