

## The Prisoner of Assiout.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

**I**T was a sultry December day at Medinet Habu. Grey haze spread dim over the rocks in the desert. The arid red mountains twinkled and winked through the heated air. I was weary with climbing the great dry ridge from the Tombs of the Kings. I sat on the broken arm of a shattered granite Rameses. My legs dangled over the side of that colossal fragment. In front of me vast colonnades stood out clear and distinct against the hot, white sky. Beyond lay bare hills; in the distance, to the left, the muddy Nile, amid green fields, gleamed like a thin silver thread in the sunlight.

A native, in a single dirty garment, sat sunning himself on a headless sphynx hard by. He was carving a water-melon with his knife—thick, red, ripe, juicy. I eyed it hard. With a gesture of Oriental politeness, he offered me a slice. It was too tempting to refuse, that baking hot day, in that rainless land, though I knew acceptance meant ten times its worth in the end in backsheesh.

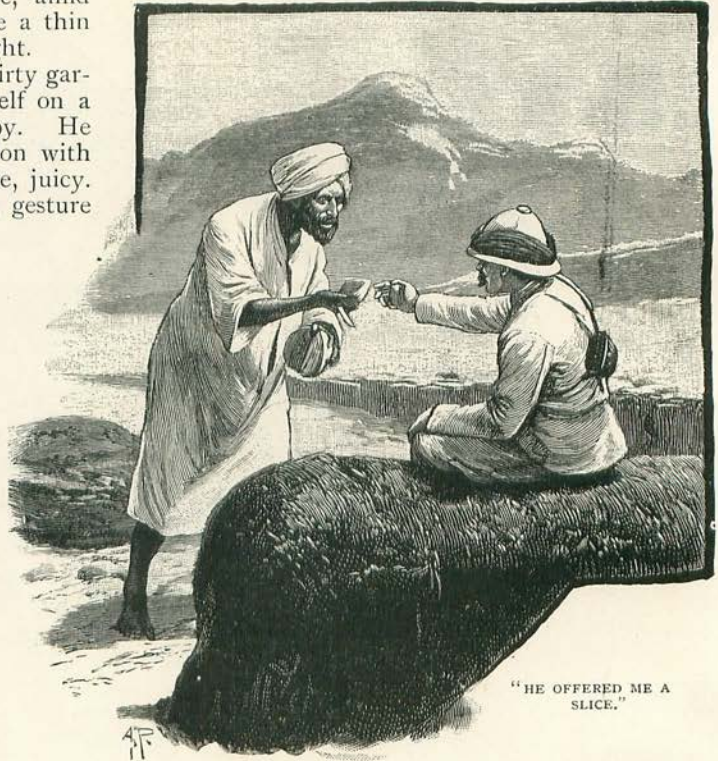
"Arabi?" I asked inquiringly of my Egyptian friend, which is, being interpreted, "Are you a Musulman?"

He shook his head firmly, and pointed with many nods to the tiny blue cross tattooed on his left wrist. "Nusráni," he answered, with a look of some pride. I smiled my acquiescence. He was a Nazarene, a Christian.

In a few minutes' time we had fallen into close talk of Egypt, past and present; the bad old days; the British occupation; the effect of strong government on the condition of the *fellahin*. To the Christian population of the Nile valley, of course,

the advent of the English has been a social revolution. For ages down-trodden, oppressed, despised, these Coptic schismatics at last find themselves suddenly, in the ends of the earth, co-religionists with the new ruling class in the country, and able to boast themselves in many ways over their old Moslem masters.

I speak but little colloquial Arabic myself, though I understand it with ease when it is spoken, so the conversation between us was necessarily somewhat one-sided. But my Egyptian friend soon grew voluble



"HE OFFERED ME A SLICE."

enough for two, and the sight of the piastres laid in his dusky palm loosed the strings of his tongue to such an alarming extent that I began to wonder before long whether I should ever get back again to the Luxor Hotel in time for dinner.

"Ah, yes, excellency," my Copt said slowly, when I asked him at last about the

administration of justice under Ismail's rule, "things were different then, before the English came, as Allah willed it. It was stick, stick, stick, every month of the year. No prayers availed; we were beaten for everything. If a fellah didn't pay his taxes when crops were bad, he was lashed till he found them; if he was a Christian, and offended the least Moslem official, he was stripped to the skin, and ruthlessly bastinadoed. And then, for any insubordination, it was death outright—hanging or beheading, slash, so, with a scimitar." And my companion brought his hand round in a whirl with swishing force, as if he were decapitating some unseen criminal on the bare sand before him.

"The innocent must often have been punished with the guilty," I remarked, in my best Arabic, looking vaguely across at him.

"Ah, yes," he assented, smiling. "So Allah ordained. But sometimes, even then, the saints were kind; we got off unexpectedly. I could tell you a strange story that once happened to myself." His eyes twinkled hard. "It was a curious adventure," he went on; "the effendi might like, perhaps, to hear it. I was condemned to death, and all but executed. It shows the wonderful ways of Allah."

These Coptic Christians, indeed, speaking Arabic as they do, and living so constantly among a Musulman population, have imbibed many Mahomedan traits of thought, besides the mere accident of language, such as speaking of the Christian God as Allah. Fatalism has taken as strong a hold of their minds as of Islam itself. "Say on," I answered lightly, drawing a cigarette from my case. "A story is always of interest to me, my friend. It brings grist to the mill. I am a man of the pen. I write down in books all the strange things that are told me."

My Egyptian smiled again. "Then this tale of mine," he said, showing all his white teeth, and brushing away the flies from his sore eye as he spoke, "should be worth you money, for it's as strange as any of the Thousand and One Nights men tell for hire at Cairo. It happened to me near Assiout, in Ismail's days. I was a bold young man then—too bold for Egypt. My father had a piece of ground by the river side that was afterwards taken from us by Ismail for the Daira.

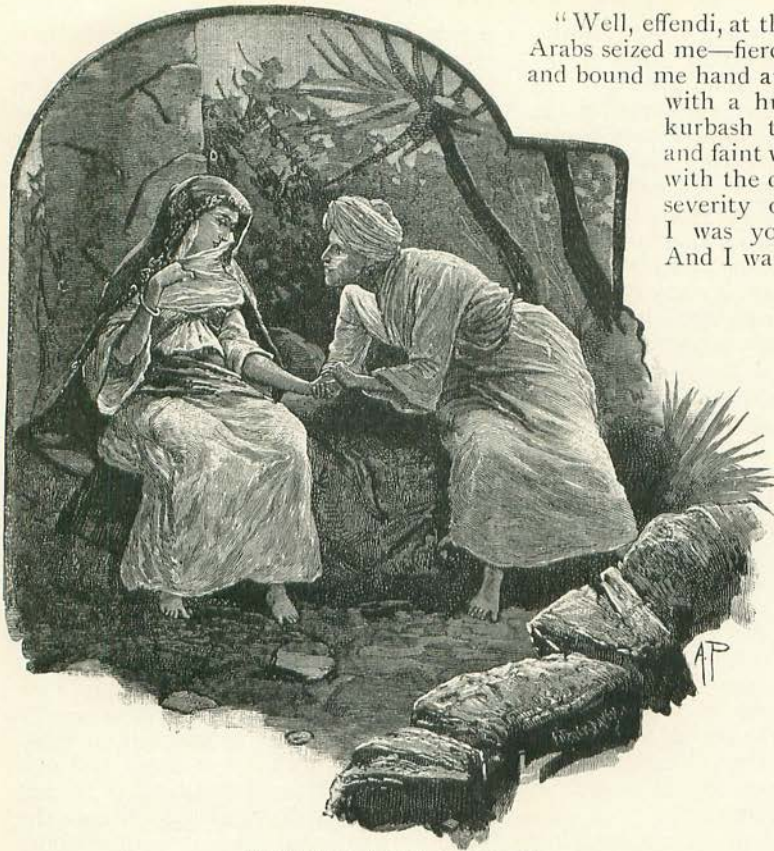
"In our village lived a Sheikh, a very hard man; a Musulman, an Arab, a de-

scendant of the Prophet. He was the greatest Sheikh for miles and miles around. He had a large white house, with green blinds to the windows, while all the rest of us in his government lived in mud-built huts, round and low like beehives. He had date palms, very many, and doums, and doura patches. Camels were his, and buffaloes, and asses, and cows; 'twas a very rich man; oh, so rich and powerful. When he went forth to town he rode on a great white mule. And he had a harem, too; three wives of his own, who were beautiful as the day—so girls who had seen them said, for as for us, we saw them not—plump women every one of them, as the Khedive's at Cairo, with eyes like a gazelle's, marked round with kohl, and their nails stained red every day with henna. All the world said the Sheikh was a happy man, for he had the finest dates of the country to eat, and servants and camels in plenty to do his bidding.

"Now, there was a girl in our village, a Nusráni like me, a beautiful young girl; and her name was Laila. Her eyes were like those of that child there—Zanobi—who carries the effendi's water-gourd on her head, and her cheeks were round and soft as a grape after the inundation. I meant to wed her; and she liked me well. In the evening we sat and talked together under the whispering palm-trees. But when the time drew near for me to marry her, and I had arranged with her parents, there came a message from the Sheikh. He had seen the girl by the river as she went down to draw water with her face unveiled, and, though she was a Nusráni, she fired his soul, and he wished to take her away from me to put her into his harem.

"When I heard that word I tore my clothes in my rage, and, all Christian that I was, and of no account with the Moslems, I went up to the Sheikh's house in a very white anger, and I fell on my face and asked leave to see him.

"The Sheikh sat in his courtyard, inside his house, and gave audience to all men, after the fashion of Islam. I entered, and spoke to him. 'Oh, Sheikh,' I said, boldly, 'Allah and the Khedive have prospered you with exceeding great prosperity. You have oxen and asses, buffaloes and camels, men-servants and maid-servants, much millet and cotton and corn and sugar-cane; you drink Frank wine every day of your life, and eat the fat of the land; and your harem is full of beautiful women. Now in the



"WE SAT AND TALKED TOGETHER."

"Well, effendi, at the words, three strong Arabs seized me—fierce sons of the desert—and bound me hand and foot, and beat me with a hundred lashes of the kurbash till my soul was sick and faint within me. I swooned with the disgrace and with the severity of the blows. And I was young in those days. And I was very angry.

"That night I went home to my own mud hut, with black blood in my heart, and took counsel with my brother Sirgeh how I should avenge this insult. But first I sent word by my brother to Laila's hut that Laila's father should bring her to meet us in the dusk, in very great secrecy, by the bank of the river. In the grey twilight she came down. A dahabiah was passing,

and in it was a foreigner, a very great prince, an American prince of great wealth and wisdom. I remember his name even. Perhaps the effendi knows him. He was Cyrus P. Quackenboss, and he came from Cincinnati."

"I have not the honour," I answered, smiling at this very unexpected Western intrusion.

village where I live is a Nusrani girl, whose name is Laila. Her eyes are bright towards mine, and I love her as the thirsty land loves water. Yet, hear, O Sheikh; word is brought me now that you wish to take this girl, who is mine; and I come to plead with you to-day as Nathan the Prophet pleaded with David, the King of the Beni Israel. If you take away from me my Laila, my one ewe lamb—'

"But, at the word, the Sheikh rose up, and clenched his fist, and was very angry. 'Who is this dog,' he asked, 'that he should dare to dictate to me?' He called to his slaves that waited on his nod. 'Take this fellow,' he cried in his anger, 'and tie him hand and foot, and flog him as I bid on his naked back, that he may know, being a Christian, an infidel dog, not to meddle with the domestic affairs of Moslems. It were well he were made acquainted with his own vileness by the instrumentality of a hundred lashes. And go to-morrow and bring Laila to me, and take care that this Copt shall never again set eyes on her!'

"Well, anyhow," my Copt continued, unheeding my smile, "we hailed the dahabiah, and made the American prince understand how the matter stood. He was very kind. We were brother Christians. He took Laila on board, and promised to deliver her safe to her aunt at Karnak, so that the Sheikh might not know where the girl was gone, nor send to fetch her. And the counsel I took next with my brother was this. In the dead of night I rose up from my hut, and put a mask of white linen over the whole of my face, to conceal my features, and stole out alone, with a thick stick in my hands, and went to the Sheikh's house, down by the bank of the



"THREE STRONG ARABS SEIZED ME."

river. As I went, the jackals prowled around the village for food, and the owls from the tombs flitted high in the moonlight.

"I broke into the Sheikh's room by the flat-roofed outhouse that led to his window, and I locked the door; and there, before the Sheikh could rouse his household, I beat him, blow for blow, within an inch of his life, in revenge for my own beating, and because of his injustice in trying to take my Laila from me. The Sheikh was a powerful man, with muscles like iron, and he grappled me hard, and tried to wrench the stick from me, and bruised me about the body by flinging me on the ground; and I was weak with my beating, and very sore all over. But still, being by nature a strong young man, very fierce with anger, I fought him hard, and got him under in the end, and thwacked him till he was as black and blue as I myself was, one mass of bruises from head to foot with my cudgeling. Then, just as his people succeeded in forcing the door, I jumped out of the window upon the flat-roofed outhouse, and leapt lightly to the ground, and darted like a jackal across the open cotton-fields and between the plots of doura to my own little

hut on the outskirts of the village. I reached there panting, and I knew the Sheikh would kill me for my daring.

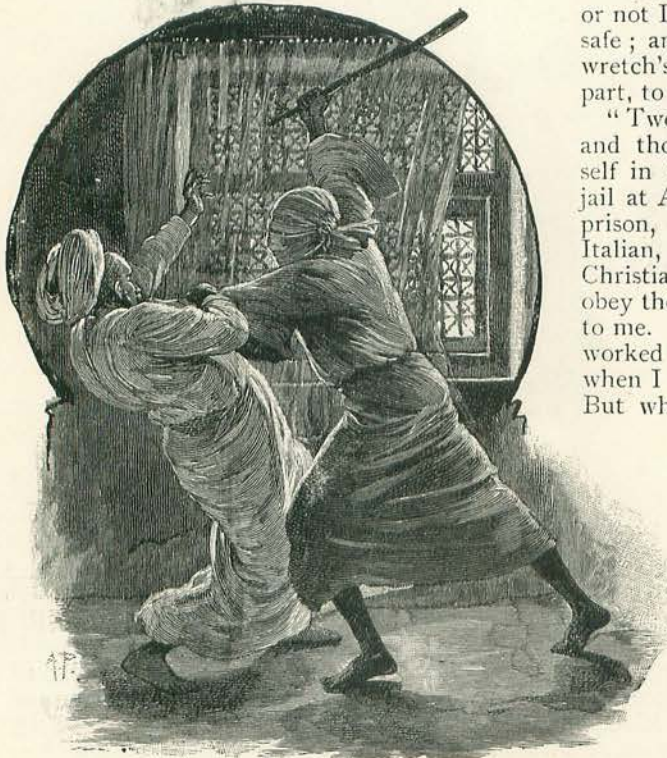
"Next morning, early, the Sheikh sent to arrest me. He was blind with rage and with effect of the blows: his face was livid, and his cheeks purple. 'By the beard of the Prophet, Athanasio,' he said to me, hitting me hard on the cheek—my name is Athanasio, effendi, after our great patriarch—'your blood shall flow for this, you dog of a Christian. You dare to assault the wearer of a green turban, a prince in Islam, a descendant of the Prophet! You shall suffer for it, you cur! Your base blood shall flow for it!'

"I cast myself down, like a slave, on the ground before him—though I hated him like sin: for it is well to abase oneself in due time before the face of authority. Besides, by that time, Laila was safe, and that was all I cared about. 'Suffer for what, O my Sheikh?' I cried, as though I knew not what he meant. 'What have I done to your Excellency? Who has told you evil words concerning your poor servant? Who has slandered me to my lord, that he is so angry against me?'

"'Take him away!' roared the Sheikh to

the three strong Arabs. 'Carry him off to be tried before the Cadi at Assiout.'

"For even in Ismail's days, you see, effendi, before the English came, the Sheikh himself would not have dared to put me to death untried. The power of life and death lay with the Cadi at Assiout.



"I FOUGHT HIM HARD."

"So they took me to Assiout, into the mosque of Ali, where the Cadi sat at the seat of judgment, and arraigned me before him a week later. There the Sheikh appeared, and bore witness against me. Those who spoke for me pleaded that, as the Sheikh himself admitted, the man who broke into his room, and banged him so hard, had his face covered with a linen cloth: how, then, could the Sheikh, in the hurry and the darkness, be sure he recognised me? Perhaps it was some other, who took this means to ruin me. But the Sheikh, for his part, swore by Allah, and by the Holy Stone of the Kaaba at Mecca, that he saw me distinctly, and knew it was I. The moonlight through the window revealed my form to him. And who else in the village but me had a grudge against his justice?

"The Cadi was convinced. The Cadi gave judgment. I was guilty of rebellion against the Sheikh and against ul-Islam; and, being a dog of a Christian, unworthy even to live, his judgment was that after three days' time I should be beheaded in the prison court of Assiout.

"You may guess, effendi, whether or not I was anxious. But Laila was safe; and to save my girl from that wretch's harem I was ready, for my part, to endure anything.

"Two nights long I lay awake and thought strange things by myself in the whitewashed cells of the jail at Assiout. The governor of the prison, who was a European—an Italian, he called himself—and a Christian of Roum, of those who obey the Pope, was very kind indeed to me. He knew me before (for I had worked in his fields), and was sorry when I told him the tale about Laila. But what would you have? Those were Ismail's days. It was the law of Islam. He could not prevent it.

"On the third evening, my brother came round to the prison to see me. He came with many tears in his eyes, bringing evil tidings. My poor old father, he said, was dying at home with grief. They didn't expect he would live till morning. And Laila, too, had stolen back from Karnak unperceived, and was in hiding in the village. She wished to see me just once before I died. But if she came to the prison, the Sheikh would find her out, and carry her off in triumph to his own harem.

"Would the governor give me leave to go home just that one night, to bid farewell to Laila and to my dying father?

"Now, the governor, excellency, was a very humane man. And though he was a Christian of Roum, not a Copt like us, he was kind to the Copts as his brother Christians. He pondered awhile to himself, and roped his moustache thus; then he said to me:

"Athanasio, you are an honest man; the execution is fixed for eight by the clock to-morrow morning. If I give you leave to go home to your father to-night, will you pledge me your word of honour

before St. George and the saints, to return before seven?’

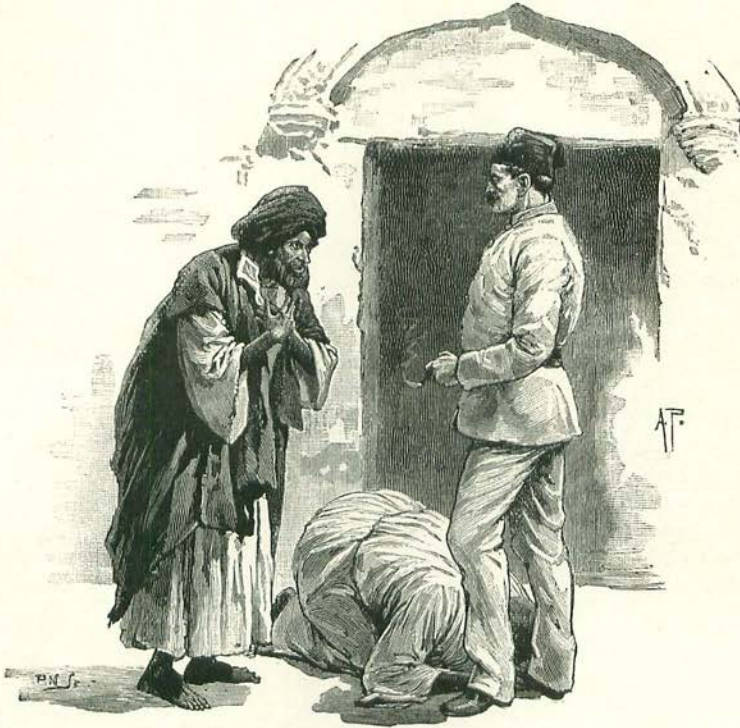
“‘Effendi,’ I said, kissing his feet, ‘you are indeed a good man. I swear by the mother of God and all the saints that dwell in heaven, that if you let me go, I will come back again a full hour before the time fixed for the execution.’ And I meant it, too, for I only wished before I died to say good-bye once more to Laila.

“Well, the governor took me secretly into his own house, and telling me many

am to break my word of honour to the governor of the prison.’

“‘That isn’t it,’ he made reply. ‘I have a plan of my own which I will proceed in words to make clear before you.’

“What happened next would be long to relate, effendi.” But I noticed that the fellah’s eyes twinkled as he spoke, like one who passes over of set purpose an important episode. “All I need tell you now is, that that whole night through the good governor lay awake, wondering whether or not I



“‘EFFENDI!’ I SAID, KISSING HIS FEET.”

times over that he trusted to my honour, and would lose his place if it were known he had let me go, he put me forth, with my brother, by his own private door, making me swear on no account to be late for the execution.

“As soon as I got outside, I said to my brother, ‘Tell me, Sirgeh, at whose house is Laila?’

“And my brother answered and smiled, ‘Laila is still at Karnak, where we sent her for safety, and our father is well. But I have a plan for your escape that I think will serve you.’

“‘Never!’ I cried, horror-struck, ‘if I

would come home to time, and blaming himself in his heart for having given such leave to a mere condemned criminal. Still, effendi, though I am but poor, I am a man of honour. As the clock struck six in the prison court next morning, I knocked at the governor’s window with the appointed signal; and the governor rose, and let me in to my cell, and praised me for my honour, and was well pleased to see me. ‘I knew, Athanasio,’ he said, roping his moustache once more, ‘you were a man to be trusted.’

“At eight o’clock they took me out into the courtyard. The executioner was there already, a great black Nubian, with a very

sharp scimitar. It was terrible to look around ; I was greatly frightened. 'Surely,' said I to myself, 'the bitterness of death is past. But Laila is saved ; and I die for Laila.'

"I knelt down and bent my head. I feared, after all, no respite was coming. The executioner stood forth and raised the scimitar in his hand. I almost thought I heard it swish through the air ; I saw the bright gleam of the blade as it descended. But just at that moment, as the executioner delayed, a loud commotion arose in the

voice again he cried to the executioner, 'In Allah's name, Hassan, let there be no execution !'

"The lookers-on, to right and left, raised a mighty cry, and called out with one voice, 'The Sheikh ! The Sheikh ! Who can have thus disfigured him ?'

"But the Sheikh himself came forward in great pain, like one whose bones ache, and, dismounting from the mule, spoke aloud to the governor. 'In Allah's name,' he said, trembling, 'let this man go ; he is innocent. I swore to him falsely, though



"THE EXECUTIONER RAISED HIS SCIMITAR."

outer court. I raised my head and listened. We heard a voice cry, 'In Allah's name, let me in. There must be no execution !' The gates opened wide, and into the inner courtyard there rode with long strides a great white mule, and on its back, scarcely able to sit up, a sorry figure !

"He was wrapped round in bandages, and swathed from head to foot like a man sore wounded. His face was bruised, and his limbs swollen. But he upheld one hand in solemn warning, and in a loud

I believed it to be true. For see, last night about twelve o'clock, the self-same dog who broke into my house before, entered my room, with violence, through the open window. He carried in his hands the self-same stick as last time, and had his face covered, as ever, with a linen cloth. And I knew by his figure and his voice he was the very same dog that had previously beaten me. But before I could cry aloud to rouse the house, the infidel had fallen upon me once more, and thwacked me, as

you see, within an inch of my life, and covered me with bruises, and then bid me take care how I accused innocent people like Athanasio of hurting me. And after that he jumped through the open window and went away once more. And I was greatly afraid, fearing the wrath of Allah, if I let this man Athanasio be killed in his stead, though he is but an infidel. And I rose and saddled my mule very early, and rode straight into Assiout, to tell you and the Cadi I had borne false witness, and to save myself from the guilt of an innocent soul on my shoulders.

"Then all the people around cried out with one voice, 'A miracle! a miracle!' And the Sheikh stood trembling beside, with faintness and with terror.

"But the governor drew me a few paces apart.

"'Athanasio, you rascal,' he said, half laughing, 'it is you that have done this thing! It is you that have assaulted him!

You got out last night on your word of honour on purpose to play this scurvy trick upon us!'

"'Effendi,' I made answer, bowing low, 'life is sweet; he beat me, unjustly, first, and he would have taken my Laila from me. Moreover, I swear to you, by St. George and the mother of God, when I left the prison last night I really believed my father was dying.'

"The governor laughed again. 'Well, you can go, you rogue,' he said. 'The Cadi will soon come round to deliver you. But I advise you to make yourself scarce as fast as you can, for sooner or later this trick of yours may be discovered. I can't tell upon you, or I would lose my place. But you may be found out, for all that. Go, at once, up the river.'

"That is my hut that you see over yonder, effendi, where Laila and I live. The Sheikh is dead. And the English are now our real lords in Egypt."