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The Yacoubian Building

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Extract

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The distance between Baehler Passage, where Zaki Bey el Dessouki lives, and his office in the Yacoubian Building is not more than a hundred meters, but it takes him an hour to cover it each morning as he is obliged to greet his friends on the street. Clothing- and shoe-store owners, their employees (of both sexes), waiters, cinema staff, habitués of the Brazilian Coffee Stores, even doorkeepers, shoeshine men, beggars, and traffic cops—Zaki Bey knows them all by name and exchanges greetings and news with them. Zaki Bey is one of the oldest residents of Suleiman Basha Street, to which he came in the late 1940s after his return from his studies in France and which he has never thereafter left. To the residents of the street he cuts a well-loved, folkloric figure when he appears before them in his three-piece suit (winter and summer, its bagginess hiding his tiny, emaciated body); with his carefully ironed handkerchief always dangling from his jacket pocket and always of the same color as his tie; with his celebrated cigar, which, in his glory days, was Cuban deluxe but is now of the foul-smelling, tightly packed, low-quality local kind; and with his old, wrinkled face, his thick glasses, his gleaming false teeth, and his dyed black hair, whose few locks are arranged in rows from the leftmost to the rightmost side of his head in the hope of covering the broad, naked, bald patch. In brief, Zaki Bey el Dessouki is something of a legend, which makes his presence both much looked for and completely unreal, as though he might disappear at any moment, or as though he were an

actor playing a part, of whom it is understood that once done he will take off his costume and put his original clothes back on. If we add to the above his jolly temperament, his unceasing stream of scabrous jokes, and his amazing ability to engage in conversation anyone he meets as though he were an old friend, we will understand the secret of the warm welcome with which everyone on the street greets him. Indeed Zaki Bey has only to appear at the top end of the street at around ten in the morning for the salutations to ring out from every side, and often a number of his disciples among the young men who work in the stores will rush up to him to ask him jokingly about certain sexual matters that remain obscure to them, in which case Zaki Bey will draw on his vast and encyclopedic knowledge of the subject to explain to the youths—in great detail, with the utmost pleasure, and in a voice audible to all—the most subtle sexual secrets. Sometimes, in fact, he will ask for a pen and paper (provided in the twinkling of an eye) so that he can draw clearly for the young men some curious coital position that he himself tried in the days of his youth.



Some important information on Zaki Bey el Dessouki should be provided. He is the youngest son of Abd el Aal Basha el Dessouki, the well-known pillar of the Wafd who was prime minister on more than one occasion and was one of the richest men before the Revolution, he and his family owning more than five thousand feddans of prime agricultural land.

Zaki Bey studied engineering in Paris. It had been expected, of course, that he would play a leading political role in Egypt using his father's influence and wealth, but suddenly the Revolution erupted and everything changed. Abd el Aal Basha was arrested and brought before the revolutionary tribunal and, though the charge of political corruption failed to stick, he remained in detention for a while and most of his

possessions were confiscated and distributed among the peasants under the land reform. Under the impact of all this the Basha soon died, the father's misfortune leaving its mark also on the son. The engineering office that he opened in the Yacoubian Building quickly failed and was transformed with time into the place where Zaki Bey spends his free time each day reading the newspapers, drinking coffee, meeting friends and lovers, or sitting for hours on the balcony contemplating the passersby and traffic on Suleiman Basha.

It must be said, however, that the failure that Engineer Zaki el Dessouki has met with in his professional life should not be attributed entirely to the Revolution; it stems rather, at base, from the feebleness of his ambition and his obsession with sensual pleasure. Indeed his life, which has lasted sixty-five years so far, revolves with all its comings and goings, both happy and painful almost entirely around one word—women. He is one of those who fall completely and hopelessly into the sweet clutches of captivity of the female and for whom women are not a lust that flares up and, once satisfied, is extinguished, but an entire world of fascination that constantly renews itself in images of infinitely alluring diversity—the firm, voluptuous bosoms with swelling nipples like delicious grapes; the backsides, pliable and soft, quivering as though in anticipation of his violent assault from behind; the painted lips that drink kisses and moan with pleasure; the hair in all its manifestations (long, straight, and demure, or long and wild with disordered tresses, or medium-length, domestic and well-settled, or that short hair *à la garçon* that evokes unfamiliar, boyish kinds of sex). And the eyes . . . ah, how lovely are the looks from those eyes—honest or dissimulating and duplicitous; bold or demure; even furious, reproachful, and filled with loathing!

So much and even more did Zaki Bey love women. He had known every kind, starting with Lady Kamla, daughter of the former king's maternal uncle, with whom he learned the etiquette and rites of the royal bed chambers—the candles that burn all night, the glasses of

French wine that kindle the flames of desire and obliterate fear, the hot bath before the assignation, when the body is anointed with creams and perfumes. From Lady Kamla (she of the inexorable appetite) he learned how to start and when to desist and how to ask for the most abandoned sexual positions in extremely refined French. Zaki Bey has also slept with women of all classes—oriental dancers, foreigners, society ladies and the wives of the eminent and distinguished, university and secondary school students, even fallen women, peasant women, and housemaids. Every one had her special flavor, and he would often laughingly compare the bedding of Lady Kamla with its rules of protocol and that of that beggar woman he picked up one night when drunk in his Buick and took back to his apartment in Baehler Passage, and whom he discovered, when he went into the bathroom with her to wash her body himself, to be so poor that she made her underwear out of empty cement sacks. He can still remember, with a mixture of tenderness and distress, the woman's embarrassment as she took off her bloomers, on which was written in large letters "Portland Cement—Tura." He remembers too that she was one of the most beautiful of all the women he has known and one of the most ardent in love.

All these varied and teeming experiences have made of Zaki el Dessouki a true expert on women, and in "the science of women," as he calls it, he has strange and eccentric theories that, whether one accepts or rejects them, definitely deserve consideration. Thus he believes, for example, that the outstandingly lovely woman is usually a cold lover in bed, while women of middling beauty or even of a certain degree of ugliness are always more passionate because they are truly in need of love and will make every effort in their power to please their lovers. Zaki Bey also believes that how a woman pronounces the letter "s"—specifically—is a clue as to how ardent she will be when making love. Thus, if a woman says a word such as "Susu" or "basbusa," for example, in a tremulous, arousing way, he

concludes immediately that she is gifted in bed, and that the opposite will also be true. Zaki Bey also believes that every woman on the face of the earth is surrounded by a sort of ethereal field inhabited by vibrations that though invisible and inaudible can nevertheless be vaguely felt, and that one who has trained himself to read these vibrations can divine the degree to which that woman is sexually satisfied. Thus no matter how respectable and modest the woman, Zaki Bey is able to sense her sexual hunger from the trembling of her voice or her nervous, affectedly exaggerated laugh, or even from the warmth radiated by her hand when he shakes it. As for the women who are possessed by a satanic lust that they can never quench ("*les filles de joie*," as Zaki Bey calls them)—those mysterious women who feel that they truly exist only when in bed and making love and who place no other pleasure in life on the same footing as sex, those unhappy beings fated by virtue of their excessive thirst for pleasure to meet with a terrifying and unavoidable fate—those women, Zaki el Dessouki asserts, are all the same, even though their faces may vary. He will invite any who doubt this fact to inspect the pictures published in the newspapers of women sentenced to be executed for participating with their lovers in the murder of their husbands, saying, "We shall discover—with a little observation—that they all have the same countenance: the lips generally full, sensual, relaxed, and not pressed together; the features thick and libidinous; and the look bright and empty, like that of a hungry animal."



It was Sunday. The stores on Suleiman Basha closed their doors, and the bars and cinemas were full of customers. With its locked stores and old-fashioned, European-style buildings the street seemed dark and empty, as though it were in a sad, romantic, European film. At the start of the day, Shazli, the old doorman, moved his seat from next to

the elevator to the sidewalk in front of the Yacoubian Building to watch the people going in and out on their day off.

Zaki el Dessouki got to his office a little before noon and from the first instant Abaskharon, the office servant, took in the situation. After twenty years of working for Zaki Bey, Abaskharon had learned to understand his moods at a single glance, knowing full well what it meant when his master arrived at the office excessively elegantly dressed, the scent of the expensive perfume that he kept for special occasions preceding him, and appeared tense and nervous, standing up, sitting down, walking irritably about, never settling to anything, and hiding his impatience in brusqueness and gruffness—it meant that the Bey was expecting his first meeting with a new girlfriend. As a result Abaskharon didn't get angry when the Bey started berating him for no reason, but shook his head as one who understands how things stand, quickly finished sweeping the reception room, and then grabbed his wooden crutches and pounded vigorously and rapidly off down the long tiled corridor to the large room where the Bey was sitting. In a voice that experience had taught him to make completely neutral, he said, "Do you have a meeting, Excellency? Should I get everything ready, Excellency?"

The Bey looked in his direction and contemplated him for an instant as though making up his mind as to the proper tone of voice to use in reply. He looked at Abaskharon's striped flannel gallabiya, torn in numerous places, at his crutches and his amputated leg, at his aged face and the grizzled stubble on his chin, at his cunning, narrow eyes and the familiar unctuous, scared smile that never left him, and said, "Get everything ready for a meeting, quickly."

Thus spoke the Bey in brusque tones as he went out onto the balcony. In their common dictionary, "a meeting" meant the Bey's spending time alone with a woman in the office, and "everything" referred to certain rites that Abaskharon performed for his master just before the

love-making, starting with an injection of imported Tri-B vitamin supplement that he administered to him in the buttock and that hurt him so much each time that he would moan out loud and pour curses on "that ass" Abaskharon for his heavy, brutish touch. This would be followed by a cup of sugarless coffee made of beans spiced with nutmeg that the bey would imbibe slowly while dissolving beneath his tongue a small piece of opium. The rites concluded with the placing of a large plate of salad in the middle of the table next to a bottle of Black Label whisky, two empty glasses, and a metal champagne bucket filled to the brim with ice cubes.

Abaskharon quickly set about getting everything ready while Zaki Bey took a seat on the balcony overlooking Suleiman Basha, lit a cigar, and settled down to watch the passersby. His feelings swung between bounding impatience for the beautiful meeting and promptings of anxiety that his sweetheart Rabab would fail to turn up for the appointment, in which case he would have wasted the entire month of effort that he had expended in pursuit of her. He had been obsessed with her since he first saw her at the Cairo Bar in Tawfikiya Square where she worked as a hostess. She had bewitched him completely and day after day he had gone back to the bar to see her. Describing her to an aged friend, he had said, "She represents the beauty of the common people in all its vulgarity and provocativeness. She looks as though she had just stepped out of one of those paintings by Mahmoud Said." Zaki Bey then expatiated on this to make his meaning clearer to his friend, saying, "Do you remember that maid at home who used to beguile your dreams when you were an adolescent? And of whom it was your dearest wish that you might stick yourself to her soft behind, then grab her tender-skinned breasts with your hands as she washed the dishes at the kitchen sink? And that she would bend over in a way that made you stick to her even more closely and whisper in provocative refusal, before giving herself to you, 'Sir. . . . It's wrong, sir . . . ?' In Rabab I have stumbled onto just such a treasure."