

The iron
shutters were still
down all along the
main street,

no customers yet at the garage where she stood waiting, the road deserted. Two early traders in long tunics, carrying a crate of melons between them, strolled past without speaking and disappeared round a corner. The garage-attendant who sometimes gave her change moved slowly from pump to kiosk, counting a wad of small notes. She shivered in the vast shadow of the fly-over, and the taxi coasted to a halt in front of her without a sound.

Alex bent down to the window and said: "Nazlet as-Samman."

"Sikis bound."

"I mean the village itself, not the Pyramids. I don't want to do a tour, just ride a horse. Just to Nazlet as-Samman itself."

"Six pounds" in Arabic, this time.

"Tell you what" she replied, climbing into the back of the car, "I'll give you two pounds fifty" and the driver said nothing and started the engine.

Some of the small notes turned into petrol and then into energy and fumes, and the rest turned into bread and cigarettes and then into energy and fumes; and the energy generated more

The iron shutters were still down all along the main street,

no customers yet at the garage where she stood waiting, the road deserted. Two early traders in long tunics, carrying a crate of melons between them, strolled past without speaking and disappeared round a corner. The garage-attendant who sometimes gave her change moved slowly from pump to kiosk, counting a wad of small notes. She shivered in the vast shadow of the fly-over, and the taxi coasted to a halt in front of her without a sound.

Alex bent down to the window and said: "Nazlet as-Samman."

"Sikis bound."

"I mean the village itself, not the Pyramids. I don't want to do a tour, just ride a horse. Just to Nazlet as-Samman itself."

"Six pounds" in Arabic, this time.

"Tell you what" she replied, climbing into the back of the car, "I'll give you two pounds fifty" and the driver said nothing and started the engine.

Some of the small notes turned into petrol and then into energy and fumes, and the rest turned into bread and cigarettes and then into energy and fumes; and the energy generated more

small notes, and the fumes rose into the air and made a pall over the city you could not tan through. There was no slack in the system. Nothing was wasted. You got out of it exactly what you put in; and Alex fed it by the fistful, crossing and re-crossing the city to procure — now that she had learned how to ask and when and what to pay — desert air and silence, things of extraordinary value.

They rose up onto the flyover, and the sunlight hit them at the top along with the noise from the main traffic stream. The divided Nile appeared bright and green on her right hand. The air was fresh and the sunlight blinding, and the driver said: "Five."

"Oh, I beg you, I do this ride three times a week, and I never pay more than three."

"I'll come back empty."

"And all the people I see standing on the roads by the Pyramids, for amusement, is it?"

"For the buses." His hand gently slapped the steering-wheel.

"Business men, Japanese tourists."

They reached Giza before meeting the first solid traffic jam. People were spilling out of the bus station all over the road. A group of young men on the periphery of the crowd prised bundles of money out of tight crimplene pockets and ran combs carefully through their hair. They were listening to a funny story, she thought, because suddenly they all burst into laughter; and as they laughed they stepped back easily, their circle broken by a woman with a basket of tomatoes who was passing slowly through the crowd. Alex, watching her step heavily down off the high kerb, became aware that the driver was leaning his elbows against the wheel and rubbing his forehead, complaining loudly of a headache. Alex rummaged in her pocket for aspirin and, since the road was blocked as far ahead as they could see, he pulled over by a soft-drinks stall and called for two Sport.

The woman was wearing high-heeled mules. Her feet looked pale and bare and tired, her heels squashy from all the weight she had to carry. She took a tomato out of the basket and handed it, without breaking her stride, to a beggar in the road.

small notes, and the fumes rose into the air and made a pall over the city you could not tan through. There was no slack in the system. Nothing was wasted. You got out of it exactly what you put in; and Alex fed it by the fistful, crossing and re-crossing the city to procure — now that she had learned how to ask and when and what to pay — desert air and silence, things of extraordinary value.

They rose up onto the flyover, and the sunlight hit them at the top along with the noise from the main traffic stream. The divided Nile appeared bright and green on her right hand. The air was fresh and the sunlight blinding, and the driver said: "Five."

"Oh, I beg you, I do this ride three times a week, and I never pay more than three."

"I'll come back empty."

"And all the people I see standing on the roads by the Pyramids, for amusement, is it?"

"For the buses." His hand gently slapped the steering-wheel.

"Business men, Japanese tourists."

They reached Giza before meeting the first solid traffic jam. People were spilling out of the bus station all over the road. A group of young men on the periphery of the crowd prised bundles of money out of tight crimplene pockets and ran combs carefully through their hair. They were listening to a funny story, she thought, because suddenly they all burst into laughter; and as they laughed they stepped back easily, their circle broken by a woman with a basket of tomatoes who was passing slowly through the crowd. Alex, watching her step heavily down off the high kerb, became aware that the driver was leaning his elbows against the wheel and rubbing his forehead, complaining loudly of a headache. Alex rummaged in her pocket for aspirin and, since the road was blocked as far ahead as they could see, he pulled over by a soft-drinks stall and called for two Sport.

The woman was wearing high-heeled mules. Her feet looked pale and bare and tired, her heels squashy from all the weight she had to carry. She took a tomato out of the basket and handed it, without breaking her stride, to a beggar in the road.

Then she disappeared into the stationary traffic. Alex languidly followed her with her eyes, thinking: "headache" in Arabic, *sudaa`* sounds like the worst headache in the world, like a great yellow stone in your head.

"No, thank you. I've just had breakfast," she said, but the driver was already passing her the fizzy cola. He washed down the aspirin. "By God, my head hurts, really."

"Our Lord make your way easy. Perhaps it's the exhaust fumes."

"More likely my allergy to milk. Whenever I take milk. Yesterday I had some rice pudding." He turned in his seat and gave her a dull stare.

"German?" he asked.

"English."

"Working here in Egypt?"

"No, I'm a student. I study Arabic."

"Do you want me to teach you Arabic? We could make a rendezvous after the riding."

"Thank you, but I'm meeting my husband."

He nodded, appraising her, a thin unsmiling woman with no wedding ring. Bad-tempered, no doubt from perpetual diets. Then he passed the empty bottles out of the window. "You should stay at home and eat fowl-beans with a spoon," he said, as the traffic began to move again. "Fowl with a spoon. It puts on weight, gives strength." He said the saying hollowly, in a deadpan sort of way, so that she could not tell whether he was joking or not. He started the engine.

"And the cokes?" he said, when she got out of the car and handed him three pounds. She passed another fifty piastres through the window.

"This one's no good, look at it, filthy, torn." She replaced it. He shook his head as if in despair at her and began to turn the car round.

"And the aspirin?" she mimicked nastily as the car receded, put out because he had not thanked her at all.

When she reached M.M. Stables she found Hossein showing pedigree stallions to a Saudi Arabian who sat drinking tea in the shade. "Good morning, Alex!" he called. They spoke English.

Then she disappeared into the stationary traffic. Alex languidly followed her with her eyes, thinking: "headache" in Arabic, *sudaa`* sounds like the worst headache in the world, like a great yellow stone in your head.

"No, thank you. I've just had breakfast," she said, but the driver was already passing her the fizzy cola. He washed down the aspirin. "By God, my head hurts, really."

"Our Lord make your way easy. Perhaps it's the exhaust fumes."

"More likely my allergy to milk. Whenever I take milk. Yesterday I had some rice pudding." He turned in his seat and gave her a dull stare.

"German?" he asked.

"English."

"Working here in Egypt?"

"No, I'm a student. I study Arabic."

"Do you want me to teach you Arabic? We could make a rendezvous after the riding."

"Thank you, but I'm meeting my husband."

He nodded, appraising her, a thin unsmiling woman with no wedding ring. Bad-tempered, no doubt from perpetual diets. Then he passed the empty bottles out of the window. "You should stay at home and eat fowl-beans with a spoon," he said, as the traffic began to move again. "Fowl with a spoon. It puts on weight, gives strength." He said the saying hollowly, in a deadpan sort of way, so that she could not tell whether he was joking or not. He started the engine.

"And the cokes?" he said, when she got out of the car and handed him three pounds. She passed another fifty piastres through the window.

"This one's no good, look at it, filthy, torn." She replaced it. He shook his head as if in despair at her and began to turn the car round.

"And the aspirin?" she mimicked nastily as the car receded, put out because he had not thanked her at all.

When she reached M.M. Stables she found Hossein showing pedigree stallions to a Saudi Arabian who sat drinking tea in the shade. "Good morning, Alex!" he called. They spoke English.

Foreigners' Arabic cut no ice with him. "No studies today?"

"Later."

"I think you won't take your exam, riding all the time."

"I'm working day and night, thank you."

"Ya doktora, ya doktora!" he joshed her as usual. She followed him into the stable buildings where he began speedily to select the best bridle and saddle for his customer. "What university you go to?" he asked rhetorically, running his hand over bits and buckles in the gloom.

"University of Nazlet as-Samman, I think, University of M.M. Stables. Alex" — he lowered his voice — "I've got a beautiful horse for you today. I finish the business and then..."

"I'm not taking that plaited one again, he tried to roll with me last time."

"Because you're not strong with him."

"I'd need to be a weightlifter!"

"What? You need to pull him. Up!" He jerked his elbow backwards, hand in a fist.

"No," she said, suddenly urgent, "I'm too tired for that horse, Hossein, give me a nice ride, give me a really nice ride today, Hossein, will you, please?..."

He looked at her for a moment without expression. He was sunglasses and sweating, immaculate in long loose gabardine and white turban pleated and dove-tailed at the back just so. His stout face radiated an almost tangible energy. He was a man in the middle of a deal, letting the buyer wait for just the right number of minutes, thinking of ten things at once. Then he grinned. "Alex, you are a little upset today. Sit and take a rest. Today I find you something special. Don't you come here for a good time, for sporting activity or what? One minute please, and I bring you Khamaseen."

Which meant "dust-wind" and the horse was pale grey, a big mare with a pale, resigned head. There were no marks or swellings on her, and her eyes were clean and brown and deep. She had a darker grey stripe, like a dud thread in a carpet, running down one side just behind the shoulder. She danced backwards as Alex mounted, her ears flattening as her hindquarters hit the fence. "She's a bit nervous," Alex panted,

fighting for the right stirrup as Khamaseen turned and clattered on the concrete surround.

"No, you are nervous. You want somebody with you?"

"No."

"She likes easy." He pulled the reins slack from her grasp.
"Easy, look."

"Whooh, steady, girl —"

"Don't be tight with her. She wants to play. Stirrups okay?"

"Yeah, I think so —"

"Okay. Off." Hossein flicked his switch at the horse, clucking. Alex said "Don't hit her" and then, as the switch came down on the horse's rump, "Don't hit her!" and Khamaseen lurched away at a gallop over dung-heaps and out into the desert while Alex shouted with rage, reins loose, stirrups flying, and Hossein laughed and laughed.

Thump, chink, as the shod hoof hit a stone. Around them in the clear light lay the desert, hard and silent.

Alex managed to slow the horse with a strong steady pull on the reins, and kept them tight out of fear that she would run, although she shook her head dreadfully, plastering Alex's knee with froth.

Thump, chink, through the sand, past the graveyard. A child, grubbing, waved a stick. Then no-one.

The saddle was new, an English make, proper padding at the knees so she didn't have to scissor as if she were astride a barrel like she had to with some of the old saddles; and the mare herself with a wide back, wide enough for Alex to feel the pull along the inside of her thighs after ten minutes or so.

They approached the path which led down through the small sandy valleys to the Pyramids. She tried to turn the horse, but Khamaseen merely danced and shook her head, and continued onwards.

Alex clucked and slowed her, and tried again to turn her. Khamaseen would have none of it, she lumbered into a stiff-legged trot and then began to stagger sideways away from the path, up a steep slope, towards the high ground and the dump. Alex, jolted and sweating, began to swear. As they rose, she struggled. By the time they reached the high ground she was

pulling and kicking like a twelve-year-old, but Khamaseen slavered onwards, shoulders bunched, her neck bent almost at a right-angle. Then, just as they reached the dump, her foot hit a can and she stumbled and began to limp extravagantly. Alex heaved a ragged sigh and halted her and dismounted.

It was a small stone. It had done no harm. She took it out with trembling fingers. Then she stood up and grabbed the reins, and shoved her foot into the stirrup. As the horse's muzzle swung round against her bottom, she felt her temper slip its leash. She slapped at the horse and heaved herself up off the ground.

Khamaseen was rattled by this precipitate mounting. As Alex reached the point of balance, she wheeled swiftly away from under her and Alex, feeling her foot slide and catch in the stirrup, just managed to pull the reins over the horse's head before crashing sideways down onto the gravel. Khamaseen capered backwards, dragging her for perhaps a yard before she tore her foot out of the boot and yanked the horse to a halt.

She did not cry out. She made no exclamation at all. She merely rose to her feet and carefully twitched her shirt down over her back. Then she retrieved her boot and put it on. And then she sat down and lit a cigarette, and waited for her legs and hands to stop shaking.

In the distance the city stewed beneath its eternal pall, fenced off only by a fragile strip of green along the canal. The roar reverberated in the haze, a dark, unfocussed thing, recumbent, speckled with car-horns. It echoed all around, in the discarded heaps of rusting petrol drums, the shards of broken glass, the barbed wire. The blood seeped through her shirt, as red as a tomato of Egypt, and it was desolate there.

She studied the fresh blister on the ring-finger which had no ring. She wondered if she needed a tetanus shot for her back, thought maybe aspirin would stop the burning, remembered that she had none left. The horse rocked her head against the flies. "Something special," Alex said to her. "I'll say."

Then, with a deafening grinding crunch of hooves on gravel, she swung herself up and got her right leg over and sprawled for a moment, her face in the horse's mane, before righting herself.