

*Founder and head of the Egyptian Feminist Union
from 1923 until her death in 1947, Huda Shaarawi was born
in Minya, Egypt in 1879 and grew up in Cairo.*

*Her parents were wealthy and respected,
her father a provincial administrator from Upper Egypt,
her mother from the Circassian elite.
Like all girls from aristocratic families,
she was educated at home.*

*When she was 13, she was married to a cousin
who was much older. Within a year they had separated
and were to remain so for seven years.*

*During that period, probably around 1895,
she spent several summers in Alexandria
which she describes here in this extract from her memoirs.*

The repeated entreaties for a reconciliation

and my own efforts at self-restraint wore down my health and sent me to bed for a few months. Our friend and family doctor, Alwi Bey, advised me at the approach of summer to leave for Alexandria to take advantage of the fresh air and sea bathing. The prospect pleased me – and I spent that summer at Ramleh on the Mediterranean near Alexandria with my mother, brother, and other members of the household. It was the first time I had ventured outside Cairo since our stay in Helwan. Three months

after this visit ended we returned again for a short holiday. My love for the sea increased and my health improved.

The next year as soon as summer drew near I was eager to return to our seaside retreat, but my husband, when he learned of this, tried to prevent my departure unless I accepted a reconciliation. When no signs of that were forthcoming he withheld payment of the money for my expenses in Alexandria and thus put an end to my plans. I feigned indifference but, in fact, craved the sea air and pleasant isolation and went so far as to buy a sponge which I sniffed from time to time to remind me of the sea. Once as I held the sponge to my nose, inhaling the briny scent, my "Aunt" saw me and immediately understood my feelings. She told my mother who, on the next day, went to Alexandria and rented a house with her own funds. I was then allowed to depart accompanied by my "Aunt."

I liked Ramleh because its long stretch of beach gave me a place to exercise and relax. I also enjoyed going into Alexandria to call on friends or make excursions to the new modern department stores, despite the continual grumbling and fussing I had to endure from Said Agha. I remember the first shopping trip to Chalon. The mere prospect of it threw the entire household into an uproar and provided the main topic of discussion and heated debate for days. They looked upon me as if I were about to violate the religious law or commit some other crime. After considerable persuasion on my part, however, my mother gave in to my wishes and along with everyone else around me, issued endless orders and instructions for my correct behaviour. They insisted it was not proper for me to go alone, but I must be accompanied by Said Agha and my maids. The day of the outing, Said Agha made doubly sure I was completely hidden with wraps and veil.

When I entered Chalon, the staff and clientele were visibly taken aback by this veiled apparition and her retinue. In the lead Said Agha stared into the surrounding faces, silently warning them to look the other way, while the maids followed in the rear. The eunuch proceeded straight to the store manager and brusquely demanded the place for the harem. We were led to the department for women's apparel, behind a pair of screens hastily erected to obscure me from view. A saleswoman was assigned to wait on me and to bring whatever I wished. One of her young

assistants – amazed by the proceedings – asked about me and my family. Said Agha attacked her with ferocious looks and immediately complained about her impertinence to the manager. She trembled in fear while the other assistants covered their smiles with their hands. The manager was about to dismiss the young assistant then thoroughly ashamed of the whole scene. Whenever I went shopping the procedure would be repeated all over again until one day I finally persuaded my mother to accompany me. She was then quick to see the advantages of shopping in person. Not only was there a wide range of goods to choose from but there was money to be saved through wise spending. From then on she resolved to do her own shopping and permitted me to do my own as well.

*This text is from **Huda Shaarawi's** *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist*, translated, introduced and edited by **Margot Badran** (The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986). The feminist scholar **Margot Badran** has degrees in Middle East Studies at Harvard and Oxford, and a Diploma in Arabic from Al-Azhar University in Cairo. She has worked on the history of Egyptian feminism for over thirty years.*