

**SHALOM COHEN**

*Inshirah,*

*Daughter of Alexandria*

Translated from French

by Kenneth Brown

# Crouching in the salt water

and hidden by the rushes, I keep my eyes on the vat out of which a double barrelled rifle is pointed. Soon there will be more light, and the rifle along with others that are similarly hidden will let loose. It's wild duck season. Some *khawagas* and English officers have come to practice their favourite sport in the *mallahat* – the salt marshes.

Alexandria, for those of you who have never seen it, is built on a very narrow strip of land: to the north is the sea, to the south is Lake Mariout. The banks of the lake form a marsh where a dense forest of reeds grows. Between the long flexible stems, bedouin fishermen have carved out over generations a veritable network of canals in which they alone are able to navigate without getting lost.

It's my refuge.

Running away from the city, I come to a stop at the edge of the lake where the great desert begins. There's no one there; the bedouin of the *Mallahat* live on their flat and narrow barges, hidden by the rushes. In the presence of this enormous solitude, in a silence like that at the beginning of God's creation, I'm finally here alone with – whom? – with a monkey?

Slowly, O so slowly, I put the little creature in front of me.

"I know who you are," I say to her, "but don't get angry – give me some kind of proof. Just a little bit to overcome the devil of doubt so that he'll never again dare raise his head!"

Look, Effendi, I'm not crazy. I'm not the victim of an hallucination. *inshirah* isn't a figment of my imagination. I'm

lucid, have full control of my senses. I'm asking questions. I'm demanding proof of reincarnation.

Trust me Effendi, and believe me when I say that the monkey isn't really a monkey. It's Inshirah who's become inshirah. I've proof of it. She provided it on that first day in the *mallahat*. But I can't reveal that proof; it might lead to a general cataclysm, an upsetting of the balance between sky and earth, Heaven and Hell, a reversal of the roles of Gabriel and Lucifer! You certainly wouldn't make me do it just to satisfy your curiosity.

Trust my word. inshirah is Inshirah, come back to earth thanks to the Guardian Angel and the secret that she whispered to him at the entrance to Paradise.

Be patient. You'll soon see that I'm right. For the moment, it should be enough for you to know that on this one hundred and first day, Inshirah and I are finally reunited. And now, don't be unhappy. Let's get back to my story.

The children of the *mallahat* adopted me. That is, they adored inshirah and begged their fathers to let me stay with them on condition, of course, that the monkey and I would amuse them.

inshirah is living the happy childhood that Inshirah hadn't known. She enjoys herself while at the same time entertaining the children of the *mallahat*. She watches them closely, following their slightest gestures – indeed, there's no getting around it – she imitates them like a monkey. Except in one regard: she has a terrible fear of salt water.

One day, both of us are watching the children play football. There are five on each side, two goalies, and a sock full of rags for the ball. inshirah doesn't understand why the children don't pass her the ball. It is the first time that she doesn't take part in their games. She's waiting for her chance and when the ball of rags comes in our direction, she jumps up and down on it.

"inshirah!" both teams yell, "leave the ball alone!"

She has no intention whatsoever of doing that. The twelve small bedouins with their *gallabiyas* tied up round their waists begin chasing her. Just when they seem to have caught her, she gets away from them. Jumping to the left, then to the right, inshirah and the ball reach the other end of the field. The children follow her, and so do I.

"inshirah, give back the ball right now!"

I pretend to throw another ball.

She throws the ball into the air but catches it right away.

"Ho-ho!"

She's madly enjoying herself. The children are getting angry, and so am I! But then I think to myself, she's right. She should be included in the game. I gather the players together, and we all leave the field.

"Pretend to ignore her," I say to them.

inshirah is taken by surprise. She jumps on the ball a few more times, throws it into the air and grabs it again, but she is clearly confused. Why have we stopped the game just when she was having such a good time? When she was clearly winning?

She takes a first step towards us, but we pay no attention to her.

She approaches us, but no one looks at her.

With the ball in her arms, she turns towards one of the children, then another.

Nothing happens.

Finally she throws the ball to one of them.

Hooray!

"Now, let's teach her to play," I say to them. The child with the ball throws it to her. She looks at us closely, thinks for a moment, understands, and throws the ball back.

The next pass is done according to the rules of football, by kicking the ball. But inshirah catches it in her hands. Our efforts to explain to her that she has to use her feet and kick the ball are unsuccessful. One of the children has an idea: "Let's make her the goal keeper."

A great idea! In this position inshirah is unbeatable!

Boom!

Boom-boom-boom!

The sound of gunshot breaks the silence. So much for day-dreams. We have to get to work. I come out of my little world, tell inshirah to keep still, and begin to yell.

With a huge stick, I hit the branches of reeds in order to frighten the wild ducks and send them helter-skelter towards the double-barrelled rifles. The *khawagas* who had been crouching for hours inside their vats are shooting, recharging, shooting, recharging. I keep my head down to be safe.

Waiting in the rushes, the naked children of the *mallahat* await the end of the shooting. Every hunter has a team of kids. They follow with their eyes the large birds that fall into the water so that they can gather them up.

The bedouins wait for this season of the year. The *khawagas* pay well for the barges and the vats, for the rowers and the teams of kids. *inshirah* learns something new: she joins in with the children who are yelling for *baksheesh*, and like them puts out her hand. She receives more coins than even the luckiest of them.

One day I notice that there are far fewer officers than usual hunting ducks. "The war is over," Abu Samaan explains to me. "They've gone home."

Then the *khawagas* of Alexandria begin to disappear.

"They've gone home," says Abu Samaan.

What, isn't their home here?

Abu Samaan has no answer.

The seasons pass by; the hot period comes after the rains; the vats rot; no one shoots at the wild ducks.

Peace.

One day Abu Samaan says to me, "There's a new war."

We share a barge, fish together and suffer hunger together. He is the one to wait alongside the desert road for cars to stop and buy our fish. Whatever he earns he gives to the old Sudanese man who sells to the bedouins the things that are indispensable to them: flour, salt, tea, lots of sugar and the thread needed to repair our nets.

Each time Abu Samaan comes back from the shop, he says the same thing: "If we don't earn more money, he won't give us anything!" But his coming-and-going give him the chance to hear the news of the wider world. That's how he knows that there is a new war.

"It's with the Jews," he says.

I don't believe him. And anyway, to tell the truth, that doesn't interest me. I am worried about *inshirah*.

Nothing gives her pleasure. I teach her new things; I sing, dance for her. Nothing works. Could it be her age? Is she growing old? For hours at a time, she watches me, without moving. Her eyes are sad, full of reproach. I have the same feeling that I had that one hundred and first day at the market. I'm receiving the

beats of an invisible receiver, but I'm unable to decode the message.

"Tell me, inshirah, reveal the secret to me."

She remains silent. A shadow falls between us. I'm not eating, no longer sleeping; I hear voices. I'm obsessed by a scene. It keeps coming back to me: it's Inshirah whispering the secret to Gabriel. I put my ear to her, hold my breath; I only hear a murmur. Inshirah wants to communicate the secret to me. I'm sure of that, but I don't manage to get it!

Abu Samaan is worried. He tells me: "These nightmares are going to kill you! You'd better see the dervish."

Once each month when the new moon appears on the horizon, the bedouins of the *mallahat* gather together at the grocery shop of the Sudanese. It's the night of the great feast of hashish, of the *goza*, an elongated pipe that's passed from hand to hand. The *kamanja*, a primitive violin made from horse hair, tears apart one's insides with its screeching.

Most of all, it's a fair of the occult arts. It's here that I learned the basic rudiments of *gala-gala*, the tricks of the magician. The star of these evenings is always the dervish.

The soft tapping of the tambourine, a hint of the sound of a flute. Sitting on the hot sand, we hold our breath. The flute falls silent, its whining lost in the infinite desert. The tambourine goes on with its beating and cutting sounds.

All at once, his woollen *abaya* drawn up like wings, the dervish throws himself into dance. He turns round and round and round. The rhythm, initially slow, becomes rapid.

Abu Samaan, who is sitting beside me, touches me. I know that at this moment whoever wants to loosen the knot which is strangling him should get up and dance.

I hesitate.

Abu Samaan jabs me in the back with his elbow. I'm thrown towards the dervish who hasn't stopped turning round and round.

Sitting on my shoulders and holding onto my turban, inshirah is having a terrible time making sure she doesn't fall. She is screaming. Out of fear? Emotion? Premonition?

I begin turning in circles. The dervish is turning to the right, while I turn in the opposite direction. Both of us are controlled by the cadences of the tambourine. The rhythm becomes more intense and soon it's frenetic. The dervish turns in one direction;

I turn in the other. Faster and faster. My head flies off; I no longer have a neck. My arms are leaden; I can hardly raise them. They explode into a thousand stars. Only my legs remain intact. They turn round and round. Soon they, too, take leave of me. I no longer exist.

An arrow of light is darting towards the stars. An arrow of light is exploding in my head. I see it! I see everything! And I hear it!

I see Inshirah and Gabriel, and I hear the secret. I know the reason why she has come back. In the space of a moment, everything is light; everything is clear. And then – I fall into the shadows.

Early in the morning, I gather up the rags, the bits of rope, the buttons, and I make a Satan's doll. I say good-bye to my noble friends, kiss Abu Samaan and leave.

Hand in hand, inshirah and I take the road of the Delta.

*Tel-Aviv*

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*The late **Shalom Cohen**, journalist and writer, was born in Baghdad and spent his youth in Alexandria before immigrating to Israel in 1948. He was a founder of the Black Panther movement in Israel, a member of the Knesset and a correspondent for the French daily Libération. This extract is translated from his Inshirah, une Fille d'Alexandrie, L'Aube, Paris, 1992.*



Abdel-Hadi Al-Gazzar, *The Magic Eye or the Theatre of the World*, 1951.  
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