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**TALES
OF THE NILE**

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

In 1971, I had the honor and pleasure to meet in person the eminent Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, now a Nobel Laureate of Literature, in his Cairo office suite to present him with a copy of my selected short stories and essays in Armenian.

Mr. Mahfouz graciously suggested that I render some of my tales to English so that they would be accessible to all.

I took his advice seriously and today eleven of my stories appear in *Tales of the Nile*.

Tales of the Nile covers the years from the early thirties to the mid fifties.

Egyptian life has greatly changed since then except for the kindness of the Egyptian people.

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JEMEELA

“What’s for lunch today?” asked Salma to her fisher husband.

“Fish.”

“Nile fish?”

“So what? We’ll have lunch, right?”

“Yes, Soliman!”

“Wonderful! We’ve lots of frozen fish.”

“Where do they get it from? Could Khalifa become sick when he sucks my breast?”

“Don’t you start again, early this morning! The frozen is as good as our Nile *Bolti*. The frozen is from the Red Sea.”

“Is it red?”

“The sea or the fish?”

“The fish.”

“Color is no problem when fish tastes good and fills the stomach.”

“Right! Let’s start in Allah’s name.”

This is how they spoke, man and wife, early in the morning, before fishing on the Nile.

If the catch was good and they sold it, then they could buy food and live for a few days. On that day they would eat frozen fish from the Red Sea, plenty and cheap.

Whatever quantity they caught, as was the case with other fishermen, the catch was never enough to feed Cairo’s huge population.

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A few days ago Soliman had walked through nearby streets praising loudly his catch. He sold fresh Nile fish in a basket woven with palm leaves, a bamboo cane passing through the rings and held on his shoulder; also fish stuffed in his loose upper gown like a bag secured at his waist with a cord.

Those who bought fish were simple people living in basements: doorkeepers, cooks, and men who press gowns and shirts by hand or foot. They heard Soliman's voice. The well to do did not, though they had ears too!

There, on the eternal River Nile, is floating Soliman's little barge which has the shape of the dark eyes of an Egyptian beauty queen.

The fisherman crouching on his heels at the barge's edge, barely a foot high from the water, drops the net into the river with regular motions of his hands. His wife sitting in the mid-boat, is rowing with great skill. She knows when to move or keep in place the barge by following her husband's actions. Under its apparent calm and quiet look, the Nile is formidable in power, which overcomes any obstacle on its way to the open sea. To keep moving against the current is very energy consuming to the man and his wife who have a newborn baby.

Salma's palms are rough with corns. Her legs, hands, neck, and face have turned black from long hours of exposure to the sun, so they get no burns anymore. She has applied black kohl to her eyelids to protect them from the searing sun. Salma has no home on firm land. The barge is her floating house, her cupboard, her bed, and her pillow on the Nile: a real house built on firm foundations.

Salma is barely twenty. She keeps her long braids under her black scarf. Her black gown makes her look older. Constant exercise keeps her statuesque body beautiful.

Whenever she sets foot on the river-bank, only then does she find the earth flat and motionless. While floating on the River Nile, the world passes by Salma: the bridges, the houses, even the feluccas, and the yachts. She always watches her husband anxiously:

“A few big catches to sell,” she tells herself, “and we’ll have lunch with the money.”

The man casts his net and pulls out trifles.

“Dearest,” says Soliman at last, “let’s try our luck under the Freedom Bridge!”

He hurries and sits next to her. Each holds an oar, rowing against the current to reach a place full of fish along the Rhoda Islands. Both join forces whenever they row the boat against the current. This is what the Nile has taught them.

For some time Khalifa is quiet. His mother is worried: “What’s wrong with him? Why doesn’t he cry?” All of a sudden she hears his voice. She is happy.

“Quiet!” says Salma to the baby wrapped in rags and hidden at the bottom of the boat. She knows the child is hungry. It doesn’t matter. She cannot, like any other mother, take the child into her arms, press him to her breast, kiss and take out her teat, and feed him milk.

“Quiet! Quiet!,” which sounds like a lullaby on the boat in constant motion. The entire family is floating: a black almond-shaped eye looking at the heavens, but who gets bread from the earth. The muddy but sweet waters of the River Nile!

“Quiet, quiet. Wait my little baby!”

“Khalifa is hungry, woman!”

“Good. Let him cry!”

“He’ll chase away the fish with his shrill voice,” says Soliman jokingly, “feed him!”

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“Remember the day he was born?”

“Yes, yes. We caught a fish larger than Khalifa.”

“He’s lucky!”

Soliman has a soft heart. He cannot bear to hear any child crying. How often has he not left everything including boat, fish, net, plunged into the river, summer-winter and saved young men, teenagers, and kids, expecting nothing in return.

“Quiet! Quiet!”

“Not good enough to feed him!”

“Don’t worry, he will grow up, cry or no cry.”

Soliman does not agree. “Let him have milk first, learn to laugh, then cry as much as he wants. Feed first the crying kid.”

Soliman takes the oars into his strong hands and rows against the current. The child, starved, sucks his mother’s milk. He is full now and silent. Both parents are happy.

They reach Rhoda Island, rich in reeds. Salma returns the baby to the crib at the bottom of the boat and takes the oars. Soliman hurries to the tail end of the boat and throws the net into the water. The wife keeps in tune with the boat’s movement, rowing with skill. The man silently admires her instinctive rowing ability, yet his manly pride does not let him say a word. Isn’t she carpenter Hafez’s daughter who he married and became partners in work and life? It’s another thing when it comes to fishing: every fisherman leaves his wife and child at home while seafaring. Not so with the Nile. The River does not disrupt the family: father and son, husband and wife. Calm is the River in spite of its tremendous strength. Isn’t this proof of being great? We have a kid who will grow up and even before walking and rowing, will swim, said Soliman to himself.

Prior to closing the net, Soliman stood up, and with a piece of rope attached to a wooden ball at its end started beat-

ing the river surface in order to gather fish into the net as a shepherd does to his flock of sheep.

The net closed. Soliman started pulling, hoping, and praying that the boat will be filled up with fish, Allah willing! Eager and careful, he held his breath and pulled up the net with regular rhythm. Even before the net was out, Soliman could assess the content.

That morning he netted a rusty tin, a piece of rag, and a broken bottle. He skillfully shook off the net out of the reeds to start all over again, not a single fish until noon but lots of small fry. He did not like small fry. As soon as he caught one, he would let it go.

“Let it grow up!”

“Why give away your luck?” says Salma.

“Don’t worry! The fry will pray for us,” says Soliman. “Do someone good, throw it into the Nile, and forget about it!”

The sun was now above their heads. Soliman knew the kid was hungry and Salma must have lunch to breastfeed their son. In the boat they had dry pita bread, which they could soak in the River and eat with green onions they bought from Giza and the aged cheese they kept in a clay jar. The previous day they had lunched also on pita bread, onion, and cheese.

The boat had barely touched the river-bank when Soliman gathered some dry branches, looked at Salma who was kissing Khalifa tenderly and had already put her teat into the little mouth of her baby.

All three were now floating on the Nile: Salma, Khalifa, and the boat “Jemeela,” which means Beauty.

Soliman admired the beauty of his wife and her motherhood. He and Salma often would take a plunge into the river. They would also wash and clean “Jemeela.” Only Khalifa did

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not bathe in the Nile though water was plentiful; Salma was afraid her child would catch cold. She wiped and cleaned his body, hiding him away from the evil eyes she feared so much and was glad the Nile kept the baby aloof of jealous stares!

“Let me go to the market, fetch some fish and broil it,” says Soliman. “Plenty of it in the Nile! The whole world can be fed with our fish, some day, but I don’t know when.”

And “Jemeela” kept on floating...

