

Module 12: Popular Literature

Translation 1 (translated by Trevor Le Gassik, 1966)



any things combine to show that Midaq Alley is one of the gems of times gone by and that it once shone forth like a flashing star in the history of Cairo. Which Cairo do I mean? That of the Fatimids, the Mamluks or the Sultans? Only God and the archaeologists know the answer to that, but in any case, the alley is certainly an ancient relic and a precious one. How could it be otherwise with its stone-paved surface leading directly to the historic Sanadiqiyya Street? And then there is its coffee-shop known as "Kirsha's." Its walls decorated with multicolored arabesques, now crumbling, give off strong odors from the medicines of olden times, smells which have now become the spices and folk-cures of today and tomorrow . . .

Although Midaq Alley lives in almost complete isolation from all surrounding activity, it clamors with a distinctive and personal life of its own. Fundamentally and basically, its roots connect with life as a whole and yet, at the same time, it retains a number of the secrets of a world now past.

The sun began to set and Midaq Alley was veiled in the brown hues of the glow. The darkness was all the greater because it was enclosed like a trap between three walls. It rose unevenly from Sanadiqiyya Street. One of its sides consisted of a shop, a café and a bakery, the other of another shop and an office. It ends abruptly, just as its ancient glory did, with two adjoining houses, each of three stories.

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That Midaq Alley is a relic of bygone times, and that it once shone like a brilliant star in the firmament of Old Cairo, is widely attested. Which Old Cairo do I have in mind? That of the Fatimids? Of the Mamluks? Of the Ottoman sultans? Only God, and the antiquarians, know, but, whatever the answer, it is an ancient monument, and a precious one at that. And how could it not be when its path, paved with flagstones, leads straight down into Boxmakers Street (that historic lane) and when its celebrated café, known as Kersha's, is decorated with flourishes of arabesque? Not to mention the alley's patent antiquity, its dilapidation and decrepitude, and the pungent smells of an ancient medical tradition, transmuted by the passage of time into the apothecaries' wares of today, and tomorrow, that waft from it.

Yet even though the alley lives in near isolation from the courses of the wider world that surrounds it, it is loud with its own life, a life that, at its deepest, connects to the roots of all life while at the same time preserving some of the secrets of a world turned in upon itself.



The sun was about to set and Midaq Alley was wrapped in a fine dusky cloak of twilight, its insubstantiality increased by the alley's enclosure within three walls, like a trap. From its gate, which opens onto Boxmakers Street, the alley makes an uneven ascent, lined on one side by a small shop, a café, and a bakery, and on the other by a small shop and an ancient warehouse, after which it ends, as quickly as did its former glory, in two conjoined houses, each of three stories.