Shelaby entered the coffee house the first time as if he were a stray cat slinking among the tables. Indeed, although it may seem cruel to say so, even half a Shelaby would resemble a cat or a dog.

At times Shelaby managed to escape the watchful eye of Hassanayn the waiter. So alert was he that a customer could scarcely enter the coffee house without Hassanayn immediately standing beside him to take his order. Or rather, standing 'on top of him', as they say. “Coffee, tea, cinnamon drink, aniseed, kushari perhaps ...?” The list was invariable. On this night, however, the place was crowded. Hassanayn was overworked and Shelaby slipped past him. Which brings us to the events I want to relate to you.

Shelaby did not sit at a table but found a chair near a group gathered about two of the chief patrons of the coffee house. One of these was “Doctor” Bari, headmaster of the elementary school in the quarter. The other was Mr. Bakr, an employee of the Cairo custom’s department. As usual, they were playing dominoes. Every night a bloody battle broke out between them. They goaded each other with thrusts and parries of curses and scorn as their enthusiastic supporters rallied around. What added a further touch of fervor and vehemence to the battle was the fact that “Doctor” Bari was a fanatic fan of the National Football Club while Mr. Bakr backed their bitter rivals, the Zamalik Club. Thus a mere battle of dominoes was transformed into an ongoing contest between the two clubs. Each night following evening prayers the coffee house clientele sat about discussing the details of this tournament of titans.

Chance alone destined Shelaby’s place near the two embattled warriors and their entourage. He might just as easily have found an empty chair in the furthest corner of the shop. Various employees usually sat there, most of them minor functionaries of the courts; discussion of the morrow’s list of litigants or the reservation of court time for lawsuits preoccupied them. Shelaby, on the other hand, might have sat on the opposite side among a group of long-haired, bright-shirted, tight-jeaned youths. Headmaster Bari said they belonged to another age. Mr. Bakr, with his experience in the customs, was convinced that the American cigarettes which some of them smoked were smuggled.

But as it happened, Shelaby sat down near the battle of dominoes. A few moments later, “Doctor” Bari struck the table vigorously with his fist and yelled in triumph that he had taken seven points and the game itself. His excited blow on the table had scattered most of the dominoes.
onto the floor. Shelaby hastily retrieved them from under the onlookers' feet. The gesture, greeted by everyone with some relief, at the same time made the company suddenly aware of Shelaby's presence. "Doctor" Bari scrutinized him carefully a moment and then said, "Thank you, brother".

The headmaster could find no other manner of addressing Shelaby. Neither his appearance nor his bearing made it seem appropriate to call him "Doctor", or "Mister" or even "Sir" a phrase preferred by the good "Doctor" himself when speaking to strangers. Both Shelaby's dress and manner indicated that he was a poor wretch, out of place in this coffee house with its clientele, as mixed as it was.

Shelaby was in fact a young man. But one could not have judged whether he was 25 or 35 years old. He was short, his body emaciated, his face sallow with a yellowish pallor, a colour which tinted even the whites of his narrow, slitted eyes. He was anaemic, undernourished. His grey suit was threadbare, the collar of his white shirt torn. He sat crouching inside his clothes as though dreading to touch them with his body and thus hasten their ruin beyond their present state of decrepitude. He sat hands half raised to his chest, his elbows away from his body; he looked for all the world like a puppet bound to invisible strings. His wan face was void of any expression of concern or feeling. To an observer he seemed to suffer either from a state of perpetual bewilderment or stupidity; the only thing which would make an impression on one who sought to understand was the sadness which flowed from his eyes like a river of quiet monotonous sorrow. There is no doubt that Shelaby bore his sorrows from long habit for otherwise he would have been unable to smile that despondent smile, revealing large yellow teeth, when headmaster Bari spoke to him thus, "Thank you, brother".

At that moment Hassanayn appeared. The commotion which signalled the end of a round in the dominoes tournament had brought Shelaby to his notice. Hassanayn descended upon Shelaby, and hovering beside him and darting vexed glances at him, demanded roughly what Shelaby would order.

Mr. Bakr, the customs officer and Zamalik Club supporter, was busy arranging the domino pieces preparing to commence a new round. In a thin, high pitched and taunting voice, he declared to the assembly that "Doctor" Bari had won the game on sheer luck alone. The headmaster's attention, however, was elsewhere. He was gazing at Shelaby whose sorrowful, lifeless face was turned toward Hassanayn; he could not catch Shelaby's whispered mutterings but realized that the waiter was on the verge of throwing him out of the place. Suddenly, he called out, "Hassanayn, bring our brother here a cup of tea. Put it on my account".