UNTIL SUCH A TIME BY SAMĪRA 'AZZĀM*

"Don't get up, Su'ād, now just you stay right where you are! I shall bring you breakfast in bed".

Su'ād was just about to throw back the bedclothes when Auntie's hand reached out to restrain her.

"Just you stay there! I heard you coughing yesterday—it wouldn't do for you to catch a cold".

Su'ād's cough was not serious enough to cause such concern—certainly not to merit being spoilt to the extent of her aunts bringing her breakfast in bed. But she knew well enough what it was all about. So she sank back luxuriously, and with a mischievous grin, as she contemplated this sudden and recent change of heart.

Before this emotional volte face she had always been expected to rise with the dawn and shuffle down to the kitchen to make coffee and breakfast for her two aunts and herself. If she should happen to oversleep by a few minutes she was sure to hear the voice of Elder Auntie raised to a bellow:

Isn't her ladyship up yet? Heavens above! Is she going to sleep till noon? And who is going to sweep the balcony, then, and water the plants? Does she expect me to do everything?"

Usually, Su'ād would leap out of bed long before Auntie had a chance to let fly, and set about her household chores with speed. But not any longer! Thanks to Fahmi, the neighbours' son, and thanks even more especially to the neighbours' maid who had called round the day before on an errand for her mistress. The aunts had given her a warm welcome, quite uncharacteristically warm. In an unheard-of fit of generosity they had even plied her with segments of crystallised sugar and a cup of coffee that loosened her tongue sufficiently to make her disclose some of her employers' secrets... Fahmi, the eldest son of the family, with his recently obtained university degree...such a charming, well-spoken young man...always reading French novels, or playing the piano, or traipsing off to the cinema with a gaggle of chums... And her mother—a real lady of leisure, with her maid, chauffeur and cook, taking breakfast in bed every day...

* This story appeared in 'Azzām's collection Ashyā' Saghirā, Dar al-'Awda 1982.
After the maid's departure her words still echoed in the aunts' ears, as they privately exchanged knowing glances meant only for each other. And so, the very next day nothing less would satisfy them than to serve Su'ad breakfast in bed. What was the secret behind this sudden pampering? Su'ad, left an orphan to be raised under the protective wings of her two aunts, was certainly not used to being spoilt like this. It seems that somehow the aunts had taken it into their heads that Fahmi, eldest son of the well-to-do doctor recently moved to the neighbourhood with his family, was "smitten with" Su'ad.

Some days previously, as Shafiqa, the Elder Aunt, came out on the balcony, she caught her niece exchanging smiles with a young man standing on the balcony next-door. She was just about to let the girl feel the rough edge of her tongue—that would soon wipe the smile off her face—when it came to her that the young fellow was standing on the balcony of the doctor's house. The doctor was wealthy, a prominent citizen, owned a chauffeur-driven limousine and lived in a villa whose splendour made passers-by go goggle-eyed with envy. As Elder Aunt hesitated, an expression half-way between a leer and a grimace etched itself on her lips. Should she give the girl a smile of frank approval or the customary frown from which the two would understand that she did not condone, and would not brook, such brass-necked impudence?

The second time Elder Aunt caught the two young people mid-smile, she felt it was time for a brisk interrogation. The two aunts fired questions at the girl one after the other:

"How did you come to know the boy?"
"He's seen me out on the balcony, and passed me in the lane once or twice".
"Have you spoken to each other?"

At this point the young girl coughed in an attempt to avoid having to answer but a leer from Elder Aunt soon loosened her tongue.

"Yes!" she replied.
"And what did he say, may I ask?"
"He asked after my aunts' health".

The two aunts looked at each other and said with one voice:

"Did he really? What a delightful young man... quite charming... Anything else?"

"One time he saw me in the tram and paid my fare".

Shafiqa knit her brow, forcing a serious expression, and said: