1975

A translation and commentary on The Food for Every Mouth (al-Ta'a̲f̲m Li-Kull Fam), a play by Tawfiq al-Hakim

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A translation and commentary on *The Food for Every Mouth* (al-Taʿam Li-Kull Fam), a play by Tawfiq al-Hakim

by

Kamel Mahmoud Katanani

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of The Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
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INTRODUCTION

To appreciate the true worth of the renaissance of Arabic literature during the last half century, we must first bring certain historical circumstances to our attention. They all go back to the difficulties which for a long time prevented Arabic literature from freely reaching its full scope. If we consider that the Arabic literary renewal begins about 1925, we must state at once those obstacles which, for centuries, hindered the flowering of Arabic letters. They are of several kinds.

The first is internal; it is concerned with traditions more than a thousand years old, a heritage that could not be thrown off easily.

There was the pre-Islamic tradition: it imposed its tyranny on every man of letters, be he prose writer or poet. Indeed, to be really literary an Arabic text had to have more or less the flavor of the desert, as much from the point of view of content as of form. Something of Bedouin nostalgia had to dominate every poem. The poetic forms which the Arabs learned toward the sixth century of the Christian era had to be respected. The slightest deviation was severely condemned. Not that several poets did not try sometimes to move away from these desert forms; but they found that they always had to come back to them, take up the beaten path, and follow what the ancient critics called "the traditional column of poetry." Prose itself has developed only within a very rigid framework. It was known only through books of history, literary criticism, science, and philosophy—not through an indigenous Arabic tradition.

The second difficulty is of an external character. It was induced by
the translation into Arabic, during the course of the eighth and ninth centuries, of the Greek philosophy, and especially that of Aristotle. As time went on, poets and prose writers rivalled in the creation of literature where the classicism of the desert and Greek rhetoric were more or less harmoniously wedded, but Arab writers were still bound by the distant past.

There remains a third difficulty, likewise of an external nature, the stagnation imposed upon the whole Arabic world by the Turkish-Ottoman domination. Indeed, for several centuries, all relations between the Arab world and the outside world were cut off. Iraqi, Syrians, Lebanese, and Egyptians were obliged to fall back upon themselves and be content with the heritage that they had received without any hope of renewal. Their literature became formal and lost particularly all its vigor. It was not until the nineteenth century that a contact was re-instated between this closed world and the contemporary Occident, and this communication was finally to bring a breath of fresh air into the too-long closed world of Arabic literature.

There is one other obstacle to be pointed out; it is the restraints caused by religion. People believed that the Arabic language—since it was the language of the Koran—was a sacred, static language. So the language controlled those who spoke it and left them with little liberty to make new and changing use of it.²

That, then, is the heritage left to the generation of the end of the last century and the beginning of this one. Indeed, an Arabic language existed, but it was paralyzed; there was still an Arabic literature, but it
was enslaved. This new generation had the difficult task of liberating language and literature from their heavy chains. Its work was not easy and the political circumstances made it still more difficult. It was not until the victory of the Allies in 1918 that Egypt first, then the other Arab nations, recovered a little of their personality. Ottoman Turkey had just been conquered: its domination over the Arab world came definitely to a close. On their side, the Allies had made fine promises to the Arab peoples, too many, really, for them ever to be able to keep them all. But at the time of the victory, the Arabs took these western commitments very seriously, for they certainly did not intend to be freed from Ottoman slavery to fall under English rule in Iraq and Egypt, or French rule in Syria and Lebanon.

To analyze the real "rebirth" of the Arabic letters, which occurred almost suddenly in the years 1920-30, it would be necessary first to point out the principal causes. They are three in number: In the first place must be mentioned that reaction concerning what was foreign, a reaction which resulted in liberating minds and consciences. Then came the republication of classical works of the true Arab period. Finally one must not underestimate the influence of the translation into Arabic of the great masterpieces of foreign literatures, notably French and English.

The writings of the first ten years that followed the First World War were very prolific. Everybody seemed drunk with liberty and each tried to prove to himself and to show to others that he was free. There were Egyptians who went to Germany and Italy and they introduced Goethe and Dante to the Orient. They even translated Tolstoy and Dostoevsky into
Arabic, and it was then understood that a country which wanted to be really free must not give her spirit to one rather than to another of the numerous foreign literatures. Quite the contrary, this revived country ought to welcome all forms of civilization and culture. It was not long before some modern western European translations of Greek works were re-translated into Arabic. Taha Hussein translated Sophocles, and *Antigone* and *Oedipus* were played in Cairo. Then the rising generation understood that not only living languages and literatures were worthy of interest, but that there were likewise among the ancients, Greeks or Romans, things which were worthy of attention and of being carefully cultivated.

To complete this brief picture of foreign contributions to modern Arabic literature, one must mention a phenomenon which concerns Syria and Lebanon exclusively. It is the Syrian-Lebanese immigration to America, notably South America. These Eastern immigrants who settled more or less permanently in that part of the new world certainly did not forget their mother tongue. On the contrary, they preserved it and some of them devoted themselves to literature. Doubtless, they were strongly affected by the American physical and social influences; they made, in any case, an important contribution, in verse as well as in prose, very different from that which was written in the countries of their origin, both in form and content. In fact, these writers of the immigration attacked in their works metaphysical problems which the writers and poets of the Arabic Orient hardly paid any attention to. When one reads Gibran Kahlil Gibran, Amin al-Rihāni, Michael Nu'aymi and Ilya Abou-Mādi, one feels a little expatriated; their thought seems fashioned in the mold of the American
concepts which surrounded them. The form which they use seems to have undergone a foreign imprint; so one frequently sees these writers and poets doing violence to the Arabic language and breaking more or less with the classic tradition. Often also they set aside the rules of classical Arabic.

These continuing and close contacts of Egypt and the Arab world with contemporary western countries have had marvelous results. Arabic literature had to renew and harmonize itself with other modern literatures, and that is the miracle which the generation of the last 30 or 40 years succeeded in accomplishing. It is enough, in fact, to compare the acquisitions of Arabic literature of today with the products of traditional Arabic literature (that which covers the first four centuries of Islam) in order to realize the truly extraordinary advance of our literature in just about a quarter of a century. The notable progress can be seen in four well-defined quarters: prose, drama, novel, and criticism, whether it be literary, political or social.

Prose was not as abundant in the early nineteen hundreds as it is today. Arab men of letters in the past did not know the journalistic article, the literary essay, or the critique, in the modern sense of the word, or even the novel or the short story. Thus the writers of the last 30 or 40 years have also to their credit the introduction of entirely new genres in Arabic literature: the narrative genres, that is, the short story, the novelette, and the novel. First, translations of western stories were made. They were soon liked and attempts were made to write original modern stories in Arabic. Before World War I, Muhammed Hussein
Haikal first published a novel, Zeinab, an attempt to evoke the life of the Egyptian countryside. But this example was not followed, and it was not until the postwar renaissance that the Arabic novel developed in an interesting way. Since the end of World War II the novel has become the most important literary product of Egypt as well as of all the other Arab countries. Indeed, a young author, if he wishes to try his talent today, begins by composing a short story; next he specializes in the short satirical and social piece, and then emerges into a big novel which, if well received, will establish him as a novelist.

In the late nineteenth century, our authors did not know the theatre any better. When they began to translate the works of the Greeks, they hit only upon philosophical or scientific works. They became familiar with the metaphysics, ethics, politics, mathematics, and medicine of Ancient Greece. But with Greek literature, and particularly theatre, the Arab translators were guilty of gross misinterpretations. Not all those who translated Aristotle understood his books, nor could they find terms, for example, to translate exactly the words "tragedy" and "comedy." Thus they called the former "eulogy" and the latter "satire." But the moderns knew the western theatre; they became acquainted with it in school. Some of them read it in the original and tried to translate plays, especially from English and French.

The real creator of contemporary Arabic prose theatre is Tawfiq al-Hakim whose first play "The Cavern People", dates from 1933. This Egyptian dramatist has not ceased to produce dramatic works and many have followed his trail.
At the present time it seems that contemporary Arabic literature is beginning to interest the western world, from Europe to America. Formerly, the Orientalists concerned themselves only with old Arabic literature. One could really say that Arabic letters of the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century did not exist in their eyes. Then, shortly after the First World War, these Orientalists suddenly began to take an interest in what was being written in Egypt, Lebanon, and other Arab countries. Attitudes of Arab writers were completely changed; the fear of religion's restriction on the use of Arabic for secular matters was not the dominant factor any more, thanks to the Eastern genius Jamal al-Dīn al-Afghānī, and his follower Sheik Muhammed Abduh who freed intelligence from religious traditions. Thus was opened the way to the spiritual progress of the Arab world. The attitude towards women was tremendously changed; Qasim Amīn and Ihsan Abd al-Quddūs proposed social reform and courageously recommended the emancipation of women in the Orient.

As late as the twenties and beyond, we find al-Manfalūti, who knew no European languages, turning well-known melodramatic European stories related to him by friends into his own Arabic versions. In the thirties, too, Tawfiq al-Hakim showed great promise as a novelist with impressive works in which light humor and satire coated his reforming purposes. Naguib Mahfouz stands out in supereminence. His works raised fiction in Arabic to a new level of competence, especially after the publication of the superb Trilogy which traced the life of several generations of a Cairo family during the first half of the twentieth century. After the
publication of the *Trilogy*, Mahfouz was fully recognized as a towering genius.

Thus, Arabic literature in the twentieth century has developed in many areas. Usually possessing reading abilities in European languages and often with good opportunities for travel, today's Arab writers are by no means isolated from literary movements abroad, and finally modern literature is no longer largely derivative. Arab authors have been creating works of genuine originality in theme and form. Now, as Arabic literature advances further towards fulfillment of the great promise so apparent in the works of the sixties and early seventies in so many fields, western European and American scholars who do not know Arabic need translations and commentaries. The West can no longer ignore modern Arabic literature.

**Tawfiq al-Hakim**

Tawfiq al-Hakim was born in Alexandria, perhaps in 1898. His father was Egyptian and his mother of Turkish origin. He was from a well-to-do family that wanted him to follow the steps of his father, who was a judge and then a counselor. In 1915, he finished elementary school, and his parents sent him to Cairo to high school. After high school he entered law school in Cairo and got his B.A. in 1924. He preferred literature, and especially theatrical literature, to law, but his parents objected to that. He did not care much for their objection, particularly after he went to Cairo. He was active in the revolution of 1919 which was led by Saʿd Zaghlūl against the British occupation. He was arrested and
put in a concentration camp, but he was transferred later to the Military Hospital due to the influence of his father, and he was finally released after the revolution was over. al-Hakim pictures this stage of his life in his novel *The Return of the Spirit* in 1933. He also related literature to real life, and so he wrote his symbolic play *The Repulsive Guest* ridiculing the British occupation and explaining the meaning of occupation in a most modern style. The play concerns a lawyer who was visited by a friend who came to stay for one day but stayed for a whole month. The lawyer had his office in his home, so whenever he was away from home the guest played the role of the lawyer in front of the new clients and took their money. The play pictures occupation and exploitation, where usually the one leads to the other.

al-Hakim continued his active interest in the theatre. He directed quite a few plays himself, and he attended a lot more.

After graduating from law school in 1925, al-Hakim went to Paris, pretending he wanted to get his Ph.D. in law, but as soon as he reached France and felt he was no longer under the supervision of his parents, he kept himself busy in European music, especially that of Beethoven and Mozart. He spent a good deal of his time studying art, and he lived like a Bohemian artist in the French capital. His parents were not satisfied with what he was doing in Paris, so they asked him to come back and he did in 1928.

al-Hakim wrote many plays and novels. His play *The Cavern People*, which was written in the summer of 1928, and published in 1933, met with great success, and it established his fame as a dramatist. He also wrote
the plays Scheherazade, A Bullet in the Heart, Diary of a Country Magistrate, and over a score more. The Poet and A Bird of the East are among his most famous novels.

al-Hakim was affected by European art and literature, and this is shown in the great bulk of his works. Since al-Hakim related literature to life, he found it logical to say that the development of the latter should cause that of the former. al-Hakim's play The Food for Every Mouth, a translation of which follows, is a good example both of the influence of western literature on modern Arabic literature and of his concern that imaginative literature must reflect and promote social change.
THE FOOD FOR EVERY MOUTH

A Play in Three Acts by Tawfiq al-Hakim

Characters

Hamdi, a government employee
Samira, his wife
Mrs. Atiyyat, their upstairs neighbor
Tarek, a university student
Nadia, his sister
Mother of Tarek and Nadia

Act One

A regular living room in the apartment of Hamdi, the head of the filing department in the government. There is a window which sometimes could be used to talk with the neighbor in the upper apartment. The window is on the right side of the stage, and there is a door on the left side. In the middle there is only a white bare wall. To say that the wall is white is to consider what it was before now, because there is a big spot coming from the ceiling and spreading all over the wall. Hamdi looks at the spot while tying his necktie and getting ready to go out.

Hamdi: (Shouting) Samira!...Come here quickly!...Come and see your neighbor's doings!

Samira: (Outside the room) One moment, Hamdi!

Hamdi: What are you doing out there?

Samira: (Outside) At least I'm doing something useful...I'm mending your torn socks...something you never think of, of course...all you're interested in is to sit in the café and play backgammon!

Hamdi: There's no time for that now!...Come and look at the wall and see what your neighbor Atiyyat has done!

Samira: (Outside) What now? (Samira appears on the stage)
Hamdi: *(Pointing to the spreading spot on the wall)* Look!

Samira: *(Very upset)* That's awful!

Hamdi: How do you like that?!

Samira: What is she doing upstairs?!...Is she washing her floor?!

Hamdi: With all this water?...Impossible!...it looks like she turned her apartment into a sea where fish and boats may float!

Samira: I know Atiyyat!...she is inexperienced in doing house work...she is too busy in courts trying to settle the inheritance her husband left for her...she also fired her servant...and now she doesn't know what to do.

Hamdi: Well, it is not our fault!

Samira: You're right...(She goes to the window and calls) Atiyyat!...Atiyyat!

Atiyyat: *(From above)* What do you want?!

Samira: Could you please come down for a minute?

Atiyyat: I'm leaving right now...I have an appointment with the lawyer.

Samira: It's very important...it will only take a minute.

Atiyyat: OK, I'll stop on my way down.

Samira: *(Leaving the window)* We better handle it gently with her because she is not an easy woman.

Hamdi: Do it any way you want...all I want is to have the spot taken off the wall.

Samira: She'll come down and she'll see the damage; all you have to do is work it out with her!

Hamdi: Who? Me?

Samira: Of course, who else?
Hamdi: Do you want me to leave my friends waiting for me in the café?... 
(Looks at his watch) I'm fifteen minutes late already.

Samira: Make it half an hour, and wait until everything is taken care of...and I assure you that you'll find your backgammon there in its place, and your friends waiting for you as usual!

Hamdi: Today there's a match between two friends of mine, and I don't want to miss the game.

Samira: Of course this is very important to you...all your life is full of important works...but please--

Hamdi: Please don't be sarcastic, and don't make fun of the way my life is!...I am doing fine, and I am an important employee...the head of a whole department...I keep the files of the whole cabinet... I am the key of the cabinet!

Samira: You're nothing but the key of the case of the cabinet!

Hamdi: Exactly.

Samira: A mere key!

Hamdi: Yes, a mere key...what's wrong with a key? Is it a trivial thing?!

Samira: I didn't say trivial...you said it!

Hamdi: What about your life?...What are the important doings of your life? ...Mending my torn socks?!

Samira: Unfortunately, yes!

Hamdi: Why unfortunately?!...What can you do better than that?!

Samira: Oh! really?

Hamdi: We both are of the best families...and of the most important people...be sure of that. Your problem is that you listen too much to your sister and her husband...your sister is jealous of you, and her husband is a conceited man...he is just a clerk and he thinks he is the state treasurer!
Samira: My sister says that at least her husband knows what's in his files... but you keep your files without knowing what's in them!... you're just a key which doesn't know what's inside the case! Her husband says that you cannot talk about anything else except your backgammon.

Hamdi: That's jealousy itself!... God damn your sister and her husband!

(The door bell rings)

Samira: I think that's Atiyyat!

Hamdi: Go open the door.

Samira: You discuss the matter with her, and don't drag me into it.

Hamdi: No, I'm in a hurry and I have to go.

(Samira goes out and comes back with Atiyyat)

Atiyyat: Good evening Mr. Hamdi!

Hamdi: Good evening Mrs. Atiyyat!

Atiyyat: What's the problem?... Samira told me that you want to talk to me about something!

Hamdi: Well, the problem doesn't need any explanation...(He points to the wall) Look there!

Atiyyat: Look where?

Hamdi: The wall... that wall.

Atiyyat: I don't understand what you mean.

Hamdi: Don't you see something unusual on the wall?

Atiyyat: Unusual?... No.

Hamdi: That big spot spread all over the wall!

Atiyyat: That's a stain.

Hamdi: I agree with you...

Atiyyat: That's because of dampness!
Hamdi: Dampness?!...

Samira: No Atiyyat...dampness can't do all this in two hours!

Atiyyat: Keep silent Samira!...let your husband talk!

Hamdi: Be silent Samira!...

Atiyyat: What do I have to do with your wall anyway?...If that's all that you need me for, please let me go because I have an important appointment with the lawyer!

Hamdi: The spot was not caused by dampness...it was caused by the water coming from the ceiling.

Atiyyat: Do you mean that the water came from my apartment?

Hamdi: Of course...you live directly above us.

Samira: Of course it is your right to wash your floor.

Atiyyat: If it was my right, why are you talking to me about the subject then?

Hamdi: Because you poured too much water.

Atiyyat: I can do nothing about that...I don't have a scale to measure the amount of water...ask your wife if she has such a scale!

Samira: No...but--

Atiyyat: But what?...My floor was dirty and needed to be washed with soap and water. My servant was careless and dirt accumulated on the floor. Is there anything wrong with cleaning my floor with soap and water?

Samira: No there's nothing wrong with that...but--

Hamdi: But you cleaned your apartment and dirtied ours!

Atiyyat: It's not my fault.

Hamdi: It's not our fault either!

Atiyyat: I am free to clean my apartment the way I want!
Hamdi: That's fine...as long as your water doesn't come to our wall.
Atiyyat: Do you think I did it on purpose?!
Hamdi: Well, the water is there!
Atiyyat: It's out of my control.
Hamdi: We don't doubt that, but it has already happened.
Atiyyat: What happened?
Hamdi: Look, can't you see? There's a big spot on the wall. You have to hire a painter to fix it.
Atiyyat: What?...Me hire a painter?!
Hamdi: Sure...you caused the damage.
Atiyyat: That's very cute!...do you mean that every time I wash my floor I have to hire a painter to fix your wall?
Hamdi: That's your obligation.
Atiyyat: This means I'll have to hire a full time painter for neighbors like you!
Hamdi: That's your own business. All we want is to have our wall clean. Do it any way you like!
Atiyyat: Suppose I refuse to do it?
Hamdi: We will sue you.
Atiyyat: Sue me!...Well, I am ready; I already have a lawyer.
Samira: The problem is simple...and we don't need to carry it to court. My husband doesn't really mean that.
Atiyyat: Your husband thinks he can threaten me!
Samira: I told you he doesn't mean it.
Hamdi: I sure do mean it; and by God I will sue her and make her pay for everything. If you think you have a lawyer...I also have one...and it won't cost me anything because he is my friend, and I meet
him every day and play backgammon with him.

Atiyyat: You make me pay for everything?!

Hamdi: Of course.

Atiyyat: Well, I can't say anything before I talk to my lawyer.

Hamdi: Do you mean you don't want to pay?

Atiyyat: I didn't say that...I said I'll talk to my lawyer. It's my right to talk to him...give me time to think it over.

Hamdi: You better hurry up, because the sooner the better. (Atiyyat leaves without saying good-bye)

Hamdi: O she gave me a big headache...please make me a good cup of coffee.

Samira: It looks like you scared her!

Hamdi: Of course I did.

Samira: It looks like she's going to fix our wall.

Hamdi: It seems so. (He looks at his watch) Oh! Time is going by very fast.

Samira: The coffee will be ready in a minute.

(He leaves in a hurry)

Hamdi relaxes on his chair across from the wall. He looks at the spreading spot carelessly; then he sits straight and looks very carefully. He stands up and comes closer to the wall in an examining manner. He backs up with astonishment; and finally he yells...

Hamdi: Samira!...Samira!

Samira: (Outside) Just a minute...I'm making your coffee!

Hamdi: Leave it...Come here now.

Samira: I said wait a minute.

Hamdi: No...no...come quickly!...this is very strange!
Samira: *(Coming in)* What happened?
Hamdi: *(Pointing to the wall)* Look!...look!
Samira: The water has dried...the stain is gone!
Hamdi: Yes...but it left...don't you see what it left?
Samira: Lines and strange shadows!
Hamdi: That's not all...look closely!
Samira: Yes...yes...it looks like a painted picture!...that's strange!
Hamdi: Look more closely...what do you see?
Samira: It looks like they are people!
Hamdi: Exactly...they are people in a room.
Samira: A beautiful and expensive room. That thing looks like a piano.
Hamdi: A big piano.
Samira: Yes...not like that small one we have.
Hamdi: A really expensive one. Do you see who's sitting next to it?
Samira: A girl...a very beautiful young girl...right?
Hamdi: Exactly.
Samira: Look at her dress...it's the latest fashion.
Hamdi: What else do you see in the room?
Samira: A lady...she's beautiful and elegant...but she is a little bit old.
Hamdi: About forty.
Samira: Say forty-five...but she is beautiful and elegant. Why is she standing like that near the girl...leaning on the piano?
Hamdi: And those looks on her face...she gives the girl--
Samira: Yes...she gives the girl strange looks.
Hamdi: Do you see the fellow sitting in the other side of the room?
Samira: I do...he's sitting on a big armchair.
Hamdi: He's reading some papers.
Samira: There's a bag on the armchair...do you see it?
Hamdi: Of course I do...but he's too busy reading.
Samira: It looks like he's in a different world.
Hamdi: It sure looks so!
Samira: I don't see anybody else...how about you, Hamdi?
Hamdi: Neither do I...I don't think there's anybody else.
Samira: This lady, this girl, and this fellow.
Hamdi: And this big expensive room.
Samira: It seems to be a respectable family!
Hamdi: It's strange because it's so clear that it looks real.
Samira: All they need is to talk.
Hamdi: They look capable of doing that.
Samira: How about the looks between the lady and the girl?
Hamdi: The girl is frowning...
Samira: She looks very sad...
Hamdi: I think she is very angry...
Samira: Maybe so...
Hamdi: See how the lady is looking at her!
Samira: I see...her looks are strange and meaningful.
Hamdi: They are full of mystery...
Samira: With something of fear...
Hamdi: Also with some rejection...
Samira: With some compassion too...
Hamdi: Yes... a strange mixture of different reactions.
Samira: Contradictory too...
Hamdi: The man looks very interested in what he is reading.
Samira: I wonder what he is reading!
Hamdi: It is impossible to find out.
Samira: I wonder what is the relation of the one to the other!
Hamdi: Since they are in one room, they must be one family.
Samira: Of course... but what is the relation between the lady and the girl?... and what is the relation between the man and the two women?
Hamdi: Maybe the lady is the girl's mother-in-law...
Samira: Maybe she's her mother...
Hamdi: I think she's her mother-in-law because of the looks.
Samira: Possible... everything is possible. In this case he may be the girl's fiancé...
Hamdi: Or her brother...
Samira: Maybe her husband.
Hamdi: I am sure he's not her fiancé... do you know why?
Samira: Why?...
Hamdi: Because if he were, he wouldn't be so busy reading.
Samira: Then he's her husband.
Hamdi: I don't think so... because the wife would give him a hell of a time if he kept busy reading in her mother's presence.
Samira: I don't give you a hard time when you get busy with your friends and backgammon.
Hamdi: Oh!... I am glad you reminded me... (he looks at his watch) Please,
Samira, hurry up with the coffee...I think my friends are growing impatient waiting for me.

Samira: It will be ready soon.

(Shel leaves...)

Hamdi tries to tie his necktie tightly, but he suddenly hears the piano. He looks toward the door while calling to his wife

Hamdi: Samira...Samira.

Samira: (Outside) Be patient, Hamdi.

Hamdi: It's no time to play the piano now!

Samira: (Outside) Piano?...Are you crazy?...I haven't opened the piano since right after our wedding.

Hamdi: Then it's the radio...

Samira: The radio is off...

Hamdi: That's strange!...Where's the sound coming from then?...I wonder if it's the neighbors! (he looks from the window, but he realizes that the sound is coming from behind. He comes closer to the wall and then yells)...It's from the wall...from the wall!...the girl is playing the piano...Samira...come here please!

Samira: (Coming in with a tray in her hands) Why are you yelling like that?

Hamdi: That's impossible!...it looks like I've lost my mind. Put the coffee aside, and come look and listen!

Samira: (Puts the tray on a small table) What happened?

Hamdi: Listen...can you hear it?

Samira: Yes...a piano!

Hamdi: It's her...it's her!

Samira: Who?...
Hamdi: The girl...she's playing...Come and look.

Samira: *(Going toward the wall)* What are you talking about?...You are hallucinating!

Hamdi: Do you see that?!...It's really happening.

Samira: *(Very bewildered)* I see...I see!

Hamdi: She's playing the piano!

Samira: Yes she is!

Hamdi: What do you say about that?!

Samira: That's not possible.

Hamdi: But it is happening...we see it and hear it too...the girl is playing the piano. Look at her move her hands and fingers...do you see that?

Samira: Yes I do...yes I do...

Hamdi: I think I am going crazy...

Samira: So do I...

Hamdi: How could this happen?!

Samira: Be silent, Hamdi...please be silent.

Hamdi: Isn't that strange?

Samira: The tune is beautiful...there's the feeling of sadness in it...but it is beautiful.

Hamdi: How could this really happen?

Samira: Be silent...please.

Hamdi: Look at the lady, she's listening without any smile...she's rubbing her hands nervously...and the man is looking at the girl and smiling...then he is looking back at his papers.

Samira: Don't talk so loud please.

Hamdi: Do you think they can hear us?
Samira: I don't know...but don't raise your voice.

Hamdi: (Whispering) The lady is bending to talk to the girl.

Samira: We better keep silent and listen.

Samira, very quietly, pulls a chair and sits on it, and her husband sits on the arm of that chair and they both listen very quietly. The girl finishes playing the piano. The man claps with enthusiasm while the lady claps coldly. A conversation follows that. It seems to be coming from a distance, but it is very clear.

The Lady: (To the man) Go to bed and rest...you are tired from your trip, Tarek.

Tarek: I am not tired, Mother!

Hamdi: (Whispering to his wife) She's his mother!

Samira: Yes...but please keep quiet.

The Mother: We prepared a separate room for you so you may rest.

Tarek: In fact, my dear mother, I need to be alone...not for rest but for work...this work to which I am dedicating my life. Ah dear mother, if only I could succeed in my project!...but be sure we will. We are doing our best--my partner, the instructor in Zurich University, and I--to make this project easy...easier than filling a bottle from the ocean, and easier than breathing air.

The Mother: I hope you succeed...but--

Tarek: Don't worry mother...please.

The Mother: Do I look worried?

Tarek: Yes you do...you look nervous. Are you worrying about me?

The Mother: Yes I am.

Tarek: I am all right as long as I feel your love and affection...didn't I tell you that in my letters?
The Mother: Yes, son...you did.

Tarek: Even when you did not send me enough letters, your picture provided me with hope and strength.

The Mother: In that last year I was--

Tarek: I know...I know.

The Mother: What do you know?

Tarek: My sister Nadia told me in her last letter.

The Mother: (Nervously) What did she tell you?...(To her daughter) What did you tell him?

Nadia: (With her head down) I did not tell him more than what we agreed upon.

Tarek: Indeed...she told me that you both decided not to send me as many letters so I could pay more attention to my books.

The Mother: Was that all?

Nadia: (Violently) Yes that was all.

Tarek: You didn't even tell me of my father's death...I found out by accident from a friend who came to Switzerland last year. He offered me his condolences because he thought I knew about it.

The Mother: We did not want to worry you.

Tarek: I should have known at least...I loved my father very much.

Nadia: (Crying and sobbing) O dear father!

The Mother: Nadia!

Nadia: I can't control myself.

Tarek: Leave her alone mother...she also loved him very much!

The Mother: It happened long time ago...and it is not time for crying.

Nadia: It happened only one year ago.
The Mother: No...more than that.

Nadia: (Bursting out) We cannot even cry for our father's death!

The Mother: Nadia...Nadia...please.

Tarek: Let's live for the present now...dry your tears, Nadia...and listen to the summary of my project. I will not explain all that's in these papers because it is mostly scientific. All I can tell you is that this project is going to make the greatest change in humanity...greater than the atomic bomb...imagine!...it will not destroy...but on the contrary it will help millions of people to live good lives. I think you are both eager to know about this project...I will tell you soon...give me only a few minutes till I finish reading this paper so I do not forget what I have read. One moment please.

(Goes back to reading)

Hamdi: (To his wife) He is a scientist then...an inventor...isn't he?

Samira: (Whispering) It seems so.

Hamdi: That's for sure...he's talking about a project.

Samira: I know...

Hamdi: Do you know what the project is?

Samira: He'll say in a minute...didn't you hear him?

Hamdi: Look at the mother and her daughter...it looks like there's enmity between them.

Samira: (Whispering) Keep silent Hamdi, please...she wants to talk.

The Mother: (Bends and whispers in her daughter's ears) Nadia...be careful of what you say...don't ruin his hopes and future.

Nadia: Yes...my brother...that's the excuse you have. You want me to keep my mouth shut for my brother's sake.

The Mother: Yes...and forever Nadia.
Nadia: I will despise you forever.

The Mother: Don't make any fuss about it...don't cause any scandal.

Nadia: Would your morals and conscience accept that?

The Mother: For your brother's sake...for his future.

Nadia: It is only for your own sake...so he won't despise you the way I do.

The Mother: Enough Nadia...enough.

Nadia: For my brother's sake!...Yes for my brother's sake!

(Silence)

Hamdi: (To his wife) Do you hear that Samira?!

Samira: Yes I do...

Hamdi: That's awful...

Samira: It is indeed...

Hamdi: No doubt they share a deep secret.

Samira: Why does the girl despise her mother so much?

Hamdi: And why does the mother want to prevent her from talking?

Samira: We may find out now...keep quiet...she is going to talk.

The Mother: Nadia...my daughter...would you give me a word of honor?

Nadia: Honor?!...Honor?!...You, talking about honor?!

The Mother: Can I depend on your good judgment?

Nadia: You should be restless and live in fear.

The Mother: I am restless and scared.

Nadia: That's your only torture because you don't know remorse.

The Mother: Nadia...that's enough...after all, I am your mother.

Nadia: Unfortunately...my mother...our mother.
The Mother: Listen Nadia...my patience is coming to an end.

Nadia: What can somebody like you do?...you have no conscience.

The Mother: Don't challenge me...don't make me do things I don't want to do.

Nadia: I'm sure you can't do anything.

The Mother: That's what is really giving you the will to fight and insult me...I cannot take it any more...and especially from my daughter.

(Silence)

Hamdi: (To his wife) Thank God you were not--

Samira: A girl's insult to her mother is an awful thing.

Hamdi: This is unusual...there must be a deep secret to this.

Samira: Of course.

Hamdi: Look...the girl wants to stand up.

Nadia: I am going to my room.

The Mother: Stay in your place...your brother may notice something.

Nadia: Then I cannot move!!...right?

The Mother: You will not be with him alone.

Nadia: Are you begging me, or is it an order?

The Mother: I am begging you.

Nadia: It surely sounded like an order.

The Mother: Well...I'll take a suitable action when it is necessary.

Nadia: Like what?

The Mother: I have my own plan.

Nadia: I don't doubt that...it's not the first time you have made a plan...and unfortunately a successful one.

The Mother: I do not trust you...I cannot trust you.
Nadia: Do you think I will tell him?

The Mother: Sooner or later.

Nadia: Anyway...there are a few things my brother shouldn't be ignorant of indefinitely.

The Mother: I told you more than once to leave me alone...I can take care of everything.

Nadia: Is that a threat?

The Mother: Yes it is...if you want to ruin your brother the genius...then tell him.

Nadia: My brother...the genius...sure!

(She plays the same sad tune again)

Samira: This is a beautiful tune!...I almost know it by heart now.

Hamdi: The fellow is folding the papers...it looks like he is done reading.

Tarek: Listen now...

The Mother: I am listening, son.

Tarek: The project we are working on is very simple...it is very important for all people...our project is: "The Food For Every Mouth"...the idea is to eliminate hunger forever.

The Mother: But is that possible, Tarek?

Tarek: Very possible...we can extract tremendous sources without too much cost. I'll make it easier...Imagine, for example, that meat will cost one cent a pound.

The Mother: One cent for a pound of meat?!

Tarek: Not only meat, but all kinds of food.

Samira: (Whispering to her husband) Do you hear that, Hamdi?!...One cent for a pound of meat!

Hamdi: (Whispering to his wife) He's really a genius.
The Mother: This means that all people will be able to eat meat.

Tarek: They'll be able to live with little cost.

The Mother: There will be no poverty then?

Tarek: Not at all.

The Mother: And who's going to serve us?... We won't be able to find servants!

Tarek: Science... inventions... machines... when we eliminate hunger we will simultaneously eliminate man's slavery to man.

The Mother: How could that be?

Tarek: Practically and theoretically the problem is solved... but the hardship is in the application because it needs the support of the whole world... and this is not easy now for one simple reason: people who profit from controlling other people won't like to eliminate hunger because it is their only weapon in controlling the economy. They would rather spend their efforts and money in making weapons for destruction and spreading hunger all over than to work for food and peace.

The Mother: Then your project is--

Tarek: Scientifically and theoretically equipped to the last detail... and that's all we can do now... but we have hopes for the future when the conscience of the world and the human conscience will wake... I am talking about the real conscience.

Nadia: Conscience?!... When is it going to wake, Tarek?

Tarek: We hope... we hope.

Nadia: Don't count too much on that!

The Mother: Nadia... Nadia!

Tarek: She's right... you're right, Nadia; I am aware of the obstacle... but we should not give up.
The Mother: Go to your room and rest, Nadia!

Nadia: I am not tired.

The Mother: You were just a while ago!

Nadia: I changed my mind.

The Mother: Well, you are free to stay here.

Nadia: Of course I am...I can do anything I please.

The Mother: Control yourself Nadia.

Nadia: That's also my own business.

Tarek: Excuse me Nadia...I notice that--

Nadia: Of course you notice...it is very important that you do.

The Mother: Then you are planning to--

Tarek: I am surprised at the manner you talk to each other!...that's not what I expected, Nadia--and especially after our father's death--I expected the relation between you and mother to be full of love and passion...the three of us are what's left from the family...and love and passion among us should be more than it was before...isn't that so, Nadia?

Nadia: The three of us?!!

Tarek: Yes...the three of us.

Nadia: The whole family?!!

Tarek: Of course, Nadia.

Nadia: Ha...ha...ha...(She laughs hysterically)

Tarek: What does that mean, Nadia?!

Nadia: Ask her...ask your mother...our mother!

Tarek: I don't understand!

Nadia: She'll tell you in her own way!
Tarek: Mother...what does all this mean?...Are you hiding something?

The Mother: I will tell you, Tarek.

Tarek: Tell me then!

The Mother: I will tell you later...when we are alone.

Nadia: Yes...when I am not around.

Tarek: Why don't you tell me in my sister's presence?

Nadia: She wants to tell you in her own way!

Tarek: Her own way?!

The Mother: Listen son...I will tell you everything...I got married.

Nadia: Before one year had passed since our father's death.

The Mother: Six months after his death.

Tarek: Who did you marry?

The Mother: Dr. Mamdouh...

Tarek: Your cousin?

The Mother: Yes...

Nadia: They had a violent love going on since they were very young.

The Mother: Shut up, Nadia.

Tarek: Why didn't you marry him at the beginning?

Nadia: He was poor...and she preferred our rich father to him.

The Mother: Nadia!

Nadia: Tell him everything...everything I read in his old letters to you which I found in your jewelry box...you were from a poor family, and so you married our father but you still loved your cousin... and our poor father didn't know about it.

The Mother: I swear I did not cheat him at all.
Nadia: Because your cousin left town and got married and stayed out until his rich wife died...then he came back here to Cairo.

The Mother: I never tried to contact him when your father was still alive.

Nadia: But you didn't call any other doctor to treat our father.

The Mother: What's wrong with that?!

Nadia: Lots of things...

The Mother: What do you mean by that?

Nadia: Do you want me to tell?

The Mother: Tarek...save me from this crazy girl...do you want to listen to her or to me?

Tarek: Be quiet, Nadia...please let her talk.

The Mother: Thank you, son...I married Dr. Mamdouh and I'll tell you why.

Tarek: Where is he now?

The Mother: He's out of town for some business...in fact he wanted to stay away for a while.

Nadia: (To her mother) So you can arrange everything.

The Mother: We thought it would be more convenient.

Tarek: Why didn't you write to me about it before I came?

The Mother: Maybe--

Tarek: Then it is something you are ashamed of!

The Mother: Please understand me, Tarek...I had to do that...any woman would have done that...after a few years I'll be alone...Nadia will get married and she will have her own life and so will you...I am not very old and I should be able to live my own life too.

Tarek: Indeed I am--

The Mother: Be very honest, Tarek.
Tarek: To be honest, mother... I cannot blame you... especially me with my scientific mind... because I am always for rebuilding life... but I think you should have waited for one year at least.

The Mother: I admit I was wrong.

Tarek: That's a very insignificant error.

Nadia: (Clapping and yelling) Let's close the curtain on this insignificant error.

Tarek: Nadia... don't be unfair... we would be selfish if we deprived her of her right.

Nadia: The right to live at the expense of somebody else's life!

Tarek: There is no expense of somebody else's life... she doesn't have to take care of us any more.

Nadia: I don't mean your life and mine, Tarek... I mean another life which is very dear to us... I mean the life of our father!

Tarek: Our father?!

Nadia: Our father was killed, Tarek!

Tarek: What are you talking about?

The Mother: She is crazy... don't believe her.

Nadia: I have the evidence... I have the evidence, Tarek... I have the evidence... they killed him... they killed him!

(She falls down)

Tarek: She's fainted!

Tarek and the mother lay Nadia on the armchair and try to wake her up. Hamdi and Samira keep watching as if they forget themselves; but finally

Samira: Hamdi... the girl has fainted...

Hamdi: And she has the evidence...

Samira: She will wake up.
Hamdi: We hope so...be patient...be patient!

Samira: Hamdi...what time is it?...We forgot ourselves. Oh look
(She looks at the coffee tray) You did not drink your coffee...
your coffee is cold!

Hamdi: (As if waking up) We forgot ourselves indeed!

Samira: What about your appointment...your friends...the backgammon?!

Hamdi: That's not important now...it seems that the man was killed...
but tell me--(The door bell rings)

Samira: The door bell!

Hamdi: Is it ours or (Pointing to the wall) theirs?

Samira: I don't really know...I think it's ours!

Hamdi: So do I...go open the door.
(Samira goes and opens the door)

Samira: No...no...no...wait...wait...that's not possible!

Hamdi: Who is it, Samira?

Samira: (Coming in) A painter...Atiyyat sent a painter to paint the wall.

Hamdi: (Shouting) Paint the wall?...Impossible...impossible...we cannot
paint it...we will lose the people...we will lose the family on
the wall...leave the wall the way it is.

Samira: Of course...of course.

Hamdi: Get rid of him...right now!
ACT II

The same living room, and Hamdi is sitting comfortably. He has taken his business suit off and put on his house clothes. Samira comes in carrying a tray of coffee.

Samira: (Looking at the wall) Did she wake up?

Hamdi: They are trying to wake her up.

Samira: (Giving him the coffee) Drink your coffee...don't let it get cold like the previous time!

Hamdi: (Sipping the coffee) Did she really faint, or is she faking it out?

Samira: Why would she fake it out?

Hamdi: To be more convincing to her brother.

Samira: She doesn't need to do that if she has the evidence.

Hamdi: That's true...the evidence against her mother?

Samira: And her mother's husband.

Hamdi: The mother's situation is very critical.

Samira: (Looking at the wall) Especially now...we don't know her true feeling towards her daughter...she is trying to help her...and at the same time--

Hamdi: Wishing her death.

Samira: Do you really think that she does that?

Hamdi: Why not?...she's relentless.

Samira: I don't know.

Hamdi: (Pointing to the wall) Look...look...she's awake...thank God she's awake!
Tarek: Nadia... Nadia... are you all right?
Nadia: Yes I am.
The Mother: You better go to your room and rest!
Nadia: I am all right... I feel fine.
The Mother: You are very tired.
Nadia: No I am not... it was just a little fit.
The Mother: You said more than you were supposed to... but I forgive you for all your false accusations.
Nadia: No... no... they are not accusations... and they are not false... they are true... very true.
The Mother: The fit will come to you again... relax... relax for your own good.
Nadia: You are not worried about me... but you are afraid that your crime may be revealed.
The Mother: My crime?!
Nadia: Your successful plan with your lover, Dr. Mamdouh.
The Mother: She is crazy... no doubt she is crazy... your sister had a shock after your father's death and it has affected her brains.
Nadia: Is that your new plan?... accusing me of madness?!... Sure... it may succeed because you have the brilliant doctor who can fix everything.
The Mother: Do you hear that nonsense, Tarek?
Nadia: Since our father's death I have been waiting for this moment to tell you of what happened... because it wasn't convenient to do so while you were very busy in school.
The Mother: Yes... since her father's death she has had all kinds of imaginations... but you are rational enough to understand what really has happened to her.
Nadia: Do you really believe that?
Tarek: No I don't... but your accusations against our mother are very serious.

Nadia: What if they were all true?

Tarek: Do you think our mother would do something like that?

The Mother: Is that possible, Tarek?

Nadia: Very possible... because you never loved our father... but you loved his money until Dr. Mamdouh inherited a big fortune from his wife... then his love revived in your heart... then our father became sick and you sent for your doctor and lover... and then my father's death... or more accurately his killing took place.

The Mother: (Yelling) Don't say his killing... your father died a natural death... and the death certificate proves that.

Nadia: The death certificate?! And who wrote it?? Don't talk about the death certificate... but let's talk about the injection that caused his death.

The Mother: It was a regular penicillin injection...

Nadia: Ask her who gave him the injection!

The Mother: The doctor himself.

Nadia: Your doctor and lover!... ask her why she didn't hire my father a nurse?

The Mother: There was no need for a nurse... because his sickness was not serious... you said that yourself.

Nadia: You did not hire a nurse so she wouldn't know what you were doing.

The Mother: What were we doing?

Nadia: It was not the penicillin injection that killed my father... it was an air injection in the vein!... I heard them talking about that once.

The Mother: How can you prove that?
Nadia: It is hard to prove because the plan was very well done...but my father sensed there was something going on, and he asked me once to fetch another doctor. I told this mother and wife but she did not care.

The Mother: It is true you told me...but it wasn't proper to hurt my cousin's feelings.

Nadia: Of course...each question I ask has a ready answer. A crime like this should be very well studied.

The Mother: Do you want to continue listening to your sister's nonsense? ...It is clear that she does not have any evidence to prove her accusations.

Nadia: If you mean the judicial evidence, that's not my business...it is the business of the police and courts. My evidence is my feelings and my observations. I've lived in this house and I've seen strange things that make me sure of the crime. Tarek, it's up to you if you believe the evidence of my feelings.

The Mother: The evidence of her feelings?!

Nadia: Yes...the evidence of my feelings...and Tarek will be able to understand me because he feels what I feel...don't you, Tarek?

Tarek: (Thinking) Yes I do.

The Mother: Do you believe her?...Do you believe mere hallucinations?

Tarek: In fact I am--

Nadia: I am sorry to cause all this...but it was my duty to tell you.

The Mother: I am sorry, son...I should have written to you about this girl's madness, so we could have avoided such a moment.

Tarek: Please leave me alone for a while. (Silence)

Samira: It's bewildering.

Hamdi: It is indeed...may God help this man.
Samira: What do you think, Hamdi?...Is the mother really guilty or is it her daughter's mere hallucinations?

Hamdi: I don't know...either one could be possible.

Samira: I don't think that Nadia is lying.

Hamdi: OK...what is the result going to be?

Samira: Really, what is it going to be?...What would you do if you were him?...What can he do between his mother and his sister?

Hamdi: Why ask me what would I do?...What would you do if you were him?

Samira: It seems you don't want to work your brains!

Hamdi: Why don't you put yours to work?

Samira: I am not used to that.

Hamdi: Do you think I am?!

Samira: Do you ever work your brains?

Hamdi: Yes I do.

Samira: Only in playing backgammon!

Hamdi: Cut it out!

Samira: Don't get mad, Hamdi...let's think together.

Hamdi: Why should we worry about something of no interest to us?

Samira: It is beginning to be of interest to us.

Hamdi: I really think it is...I feel sorry for this man because he can't find a way out.

Samira: But he is a genius.

Hamdi: If a genius couldn't...what gave you the idea that we could?

Samira: You're right...you never thought about something like that.

Hamdi: Neither did you.

Samira: I admit that.
Hamdi: Let's both keep silent...the fellow is thinking of the problem and we will find out about the solution.

Samira: Let him think for us...and we will learn from him.

Hamdi: And you will learn too.

Samira: What's wrong with learning?

Hamdi: I don't know.

Samira: Be silent...look!...he is going to talk.

Tarek: Nadia...are you sure of all that you said?

Nadia: I am very sure and I insist on every word I said.

Tarek: Couldn't it be that your love for our father made you think that?

Nadia: NO...you know me very well...you know I always had steady nerves and sound thinking...you were always proud of my education...I couldn't be hallucinating.

Tarek: Maybe it is the hatred of your mother's husband who took your father's place--

Nadia: It is not that either...I lived here...I saw and heard everything and there is no way that I could be wrong.

Tarek: Then you are convinced!

Nadia: Completely.

Tarek: Be careful not to wrong our mother.

Nadia: I did not wrong her...I am quite sure that I did not.

Tarek: In this case--

The Mother: (Shouting) Tarek!...do you really believe her?!

Tarek: Please...please, mother...let me finish (talking to his sister).

In this case you have to answer this question very honestly:

What do we have to do?!!
Nadia: I demand a clear and an honest answer for my question too: Do we have to cover for our father's killers?!

Tarek: Our father's killers?...This reminds me of the Greek Tragedy!

Nadia: Then you have answered my question.

Tarek: Answered your question?...How?

Nadia: Electra and her brother Orestes in that tragedy...did they cover for their mother and her husband the killing of their father?

Tarek: Of course not.

Nadia: Then?

Tarek: I saw the tragedy on stage abroad, but I never thought I would face the same problem.

Nadia: Neither did I when I had to read the tragedy for one of my classes in the university.

Tarek: Listen Nadia... I think you agree with me that the atomic age differs from the Greek's age!

Nadia: What do you mean?

Tarek: I mean that I will not let you push me to kill your mother and her husband, as Electra did with her brother Orestes.

Nadia: Do you think I am crazy to think of something like that?

Tarek: You agree with me then that it is not logical to think with the old mentality.

Nadia: But we must do something though.

Tarek: We have to do something useful...there is a big difference between my thinking now of this problem, and my thinking of my project about the food problem. Once while watching the play Hamlet, I said to myself that Hamlet's life was wasted for nothing.

Nadia: It was not wasted for nothing...it was wasted for the sake of justice.
Tarek: Justice?!

Nadia: Yes justice...don't make fun of that word, Tarek.

Tarek: Then it is a word.

Nadia: No it is not a mere word...It is a value.

Tarek: Call it anything you want...as you see, I am very busy now, and all my thinking is on the project. I left my partner in Zurich continuing his research and I came here to do different research. We have to meet there shortly to discuss the results. I thought I would find our house quiet.

Nadia: I am sorry, Tarek.

Tarek: I don't blame you...but--

Nadia: Would you prefer if I did not tell you what happened?

Tarek: I don't mean that...but--

Nadia: Forget everything I told you then...and I will do what I think is necessary...I cannot live with my father's murderers under one roof.

Tarek: What are you going to do, Nadia?!

Nadia: You'll know in suitable time.

Tarek: Please Nadia...don't do a rash thing.

Nadia: Leave me alone...that's my own business. You take care of your project.

Tarek: I assure you, Nadia, that my project is true justice. It is justice as the atomic age and future ages understand it...but Hamlet's and Electra's justice is a mere beautiful word and nobody has the right to sacrifice his life for it.

Nadia: The age of food!...elimination of hunger!

Tarek: Sure.

Nadia: And the elimination of values!
Tarek: Nadia...please don't live in the atmosphere of your books.

Nadia: Thank you, Tarek...I always waited for you to come back because you are my only brother...but unfortunately I have to be alone...and live alone forever.

Tarek: Nadia!...

Nadia: Please, leave me alone! (Silence)

Hamdi: It seems that Tarek--

Samira: Did you understand what he said?

Hamdi: What did you understand?

Samira: How about you?...what did you understand?

Hamdi: I only understood one or two words.

Samira: Yes...he mentioned strange names, like...like...

Hamdi: Hamlet?...Haven't you heard of the name Hamlet?

Samira: I have...but he mentioned another name,...the name of a girl.

Hamdi: Yes...yes...she is...anyway it's an old name.

Samira: Of course old.

Hamdi: That's not important...what's important is that he said that our modern age is different from the old ages.

Samira: Of course...we know that.

Hamdi: But he means that things have changed and so have morals.

Samira: Is that true, Hamdi?

Hamdi: The problem needs some discussion.

Samira: Discuss it with me in the same way he was discussing it with Nadia.

Hamdi: Not now, Samira...maybe later...we have plenty of time. Look, look, Samira...do you see anything near Nadia over there?

Samira: (Examiningly) Where?
Hamdi: Over there...over her head!...look!

Samira: Yes...yes...the paint is peeling!

Hamdi: The peel may fall soon.

Samira: It may fall on her head!

Hamdi: That's possible.

Samira: What can we do?

Hamdi: If only we can stick the peel in its place!

Samira: Don't you ever touch the wall.

Hamdi: Well...what are we going to do then?

Samira: If she moves a little, the peel will fall away from her.

Hamdi: How can we be sure that she leaves her place before the damage takes place?

Samira: We have to warn her.

Hamdi: How?

Samira: (Walking cautiously towards the wall) Hey...hey...look out.

Hamdi: What are you doing?

Samira: I am calling her.

Hamdi: Are you crazy?!...Do you think she'll hear you?

Samira: Don't you think so?

Hamdi: No I don't...but you can try anyway.

Samira: (Shouting) Hey...miss...miss!

Hamdi: (Sarcastically) Miss!

Samira: Sure...it's more polite because we don't know each other yet.

Hamdi: What are you talking about?...Do you want to meet these people?

Samira: Well...what's wrong with them?
Hamdi: Samira...you have to understand.

Samira: Can you deny that they are from a well-to-do family?...Regardless of whether the mother is guilty or not. The guy is very smart, and the girl is highly educated.

Hamdi: I know that...but I am talking about knowing them.

Samira: Well, wouldn't you like to meet them?

Hamdi: Sure I would...but how?

Samira: Leave it up to me.

Hamdi: Go ahead!

Samira: (Comes closer to the wall and shouts) Hey...Miss Nadia...
Miss Nadia...(She waves her hands to catch her attention)

Hamdi: Hey Mr. Tarek!...Mr. Tarek! (A voice coming through the window)

Voice: Samira!

Samira: (Astonished) She called my name!

Voice: Mr. Hamdi!

Hamdi: And my name too?! Is she really calling us?!

Voice: Samira!...Hamdi!

Samira: (Turns to the window) That's Atiyyat!

Hamdi: Atiyyat....Oh no!

Samira: (At the window) What do you want?

Atiyyat: (Outside) Do you have any visitors?

Samira: No.

Atiyyat: I heard you talking to somebody.

Samira: We were only talking to each other.

Atiyyat: I'd like to come down and talk to you about something.

Samira: Well, come down!
Hamdi: Is she coming here?
Samira: What do you think we should do?
Hamdi: We have to cover the wall before she gets here.
Samira: That's a good idea...so she cannot see anything.
Hamdi: We don't want her or anybody else to see anything.
Samira: Sure...because people will start spreading rumors.
Hamdi: Exactly...if they see what we see, then they'll say that our
apartment is haunted...and if they do not see it, then they'll accuse us of madness.
Samira: In both cases the loss will be ours.
Hamdi: Let's then keep it a secret, and let's enjoy being with this
family living on our wall because it is very amusing.
Samira: And useful too!...don't you feel you learned something?
Hamdi: I learned very much!
Samira: Don't you think that their conversation is better than the
nonsense you hear from your friends in the café?...
Hamdi: It is also better than your friends' conversation!
Samira: I agree with you. (Talking about the family on the wall) I wish
we could talk to them.
Hamdi: Don't try anything now...otherwise the neighbors will hear us
again, and we will not reach any result.
Samira: What makes you sure of that?
Hamdi: Didn't Atiyyat hear us talking to them?
Samira: You are right.
Hamdi: There's no way to talk to them.
Samira: But how can we see and hear them?
Hamdi: That's something else I don't know.

Samira: How could it happen that way?!...Why do we see and hear them and they do not?

Hamdi: Because to them we do not exist.

Samira: What are you talking about?

Hamdi: Well, there they are...ask them why!

Samira: Ask them?!...They don't feel our presence.

Hamdi: Shut up then.

Samira: But--

Hamdi: Let's change the subject...or else we'll become crazy. (The door bell rings)

Samira: That's Atiyyat.

Hamdi: Cover the wall...quickly!

Hamdi stands up and helps cover the wall. Samira goes to open the door, and then she comes back with Atiyyat.

Atiyyat: How are you, Mr. Hamdi?

Hamdi: Fine, thank you.

Atiyyat: You really shouldn't have done that!

Hamdi: We shouldn't have done what?

Atiyyat: Kicking the painter out.

Hamdi: We finally decided that there's no need to paint the wall.

Atiyyat: No need!...Why?

Samira: We just didn't want to bother you.

Hamdi: Yes...we didn't want to bother you.

Atiyyat: That wouldn't bother me at all.

Samira: Thank you anyway.
Hamdi: We really appreciate your concern.

Atiyyat: Do you mean that you don't want to paint the wall?

Hamdi: There's no need to rush about it.

Atiyyat: That's strange...because that's not what you told me at the beginning.

Hamdi: Yes I know...but that was only because I was not in a good mood.

Atiyyat: Do you mean that it is all over now?

Hamdi: Of course.

Samira: Yes...it's all over now.

Atiyyat: This means that you will not sue me later!

Hamdi: No we won't.

Atiyyat: I don't think I trust you.

Samira: Why?...Do you think we are playing a game?

Atiyyat: It's hard to trust anybody these days.

Samira: There's a different way of thinking in each age.

Hamdi: We live in an atomic age now.

Atiyyat: Atom?!!...What brings up this subject?

Hamdi: For example, we cannot do now what the ancient Greeks used to do.

Atiyyat: The ancient who?!

Hamdi: The ancient Greeks.

Atiyyat: Samira, what's wrong with your husband?!

Samira: He wants to say that everything is changed now.

Hamdi: The world is in a continuous change.

Samira: Exactly...

Hamdi: Take Hamlet for an example.
Atiyyat: Who?!

Hamdi: Hamlet...Hamlet...haven't you heard of Hamlet?

Atiyyat: No I have not.

Samira: That woman...what was her name, Hamdi?

Hamdi: I forgot...but let's talk about Hamlet.

Atiyyat: Who is he?

Hamdi: The man who wasted his life to revenge his father's death!

Atiyyat: Who killed his father?

Hamdi: His uncle, who was his mother's lover.

Samira: The mother knew about it, imagine!

Atiyyat: Was that reported in the newspapers?

Hamdi: What papers?...It's very old.

Atiyyat: Old!...then what do you have to do with it now?

Hamdi: Because now Hamlet is considered to have lost his life for nothing.

Atiyyat: That's very beautiful!

Samira: But the serious thing is how to solve the problem. You see...history is repeating itself.

Atiyyat: That's astonishing.

Hamdi: Suppose that Hamlet is still alive...do you think he'd do what he did before?

Samira: Why Hamlet?...Let's consider Tarek.

Atiyyat: And who's Tarek?

Hamdi: A person.

Atiyyat: Is he from the old history too?!

Samira: No.
Hamdi: He's a friend of ours.
Atiyyat: What was the result then?
Hamdi: We still don't know yet...the problem is very serious...it is the matter of morals.
Atiyyat: Morals?!
Samira: It seems that Nadia is--
Hamdi: You are right...it seems that Nadia is--
Atiyyat: And who's Nadia?!
Samira: Another friend.
Hamdi: She wants her brother to do something...and I still don't know what it is.
Samira: Neither do I.
Atiyyat: And neither do I...I don't think I understand what's going on.
Samira: We are sorry for that.
Hamdi: I will tell you. Suppose that your mother--
Atiyyat: My mother is dead!
Hamdi: It is just a mere supposition...suppose she had a lover.
Atiyyat: Oh! God forbid!
Samira: It is just a supposition.
Hamdi: Of course it is. Suppose she had a lover, and they both killed your father...what would you do?
Atiyyat: I would kill them both.
Hamdi: That's wrong!
Atiyyat: What do you want me to do then?
Samira: That's the problem!
Atiyyat: What problem?...please tell me!
Samira: The problem that's bothering us.

Atiyyat: Please let's talk about the wall now.

Hamdi: I thought we were done with that!

Atiyyat: Not yet...you have to write it down. Write down that you drop the charge.

Hamdi: That's very easy. (He writes down that he drops the charge, and then he signs). Does that make you happy now?

Atiyyat: (Taking the piece of paper) Thank you.

Atiyyat starts to leave, but she suddenly hears the piano. She turns back.

Atiyyat: It sounds like somebody is playing the piano.

Samira: (Perplexed) I think it is the radio.

Atiyyat: (Looking at the open window) It looks like I left my radio turned on...but it seems that the sound is coming from your room.

Samira: I don't think so.

Hamdi: See Atiyyat to the door, Samira! (Samira and Atiyyat go out)

Hamdi uncovers the wall very quickly, and Samira comes back in a hurry.

Hamdi: (Whispering) It's Nadia!

Samira: (Whispering) Yes...her tune is beautiful.

Tarek: Enough piano, Nadia...come and let's discuss the problem. Each has to convince the other.

Nadia: You'll never be able to convince me!

Tarek: Maybe I can't convince you...but we have to reach a solution.

Nadia: I have my own solution.

Tarek: What is it?

Nadia: I told you before...you'll know it in the suitable time.
The Mother: Tarek...how long will this thing go on?

Tarek: You better keep silent because the matter is out of your hands now.

The Mother: Then you think I am guilty?!

Tarek: Your guilt or innocence are not important now...all that's important is to find a solution.

The Mother: But both of you talk as if I am guilty!

Tarek: This is our supposition.

The Mother: I will not accept that!

Tarek: I know you will not.

The Mother: This means that you believe your sister and don't believe me!

Tarek: I am not a judge or an investigator...I am just supposing the worst.

The Mother: Then it's mere supposition!

Tarek: Yes it is...but please keep silent so we can reach a solution.

The Mother: OK...I'll be silent.

Nadia: I'll be silent too as long as it is a mere supposition.

Tarek: No...you have to discuss the matter with me...because you are positive that a crime was committed.

Nadia: Yes...I am positive.

Tarek: I didn't see anything...you are telling me in the same manner the ghost told Hamlet...and you know well that Hamlet did not take for granted what the ghost had told him...but he investigated the matter. Do you want me to leave my project and research and run on an investigation?

Nadia: No.
Tarek: Of course not...Hamlet ran the investigation himself because he couldn't find somebody else to do it for him. Now we have courts and they will take care of everything. Do you want me to notify the authorities?

Nadia: I leave it to your judgment.

Tarek: Do you want me to call the police and hand them my mother so they can investigate this ugly crime?

Nadia: At least you admit it is ugly!

Tarek: Yes I do...but think of the great scandal that will follow!

Nadia: Then you are thinking of yourself!

Tarek: I am more concerned about you than about myself...because a girl's reputation is affected by her mother's.

Nadia: Then you are thinking of us!

Tarek: Of course, Nadia.

Nadia: It's strange...I never thought of myself!

Tarek: You are only interested in justice!

Nadia: Yes...justice.

Tarek: Justice will lead to a scandal.

Nadia: What an improvement!

Tarek: What do you mean?

Nadia: For the sake of justice Hamlet endured death...and now we cannot take a scandal!

Tarek: In Hamlet's time there were no photographs and no newspapers.

Nadia: In his time, duty was above all!

Tarek: Then you want me to call the police to put our mother in prison.

Nadia: Don't ask me to tell you what to do...but at least I know what I am going to do.
Tarek: How about me?

Nadia: It's your own business.

Tarek: The problem is that you are very emotional...if you look at the problem more objectively you'll share my opinion.

Nadia: By the way...I think you'll like your room upstairs. You share the same floor with Dr. Mamdouh and his wife--your mother--It is very quiet and you can continue your research.

Tarek: Are you trying to provoke me?

Nadia: I am sorry, Tarek.

Tarek: I don't blame you...and I understand your problem...but I also have my own problem.

Nadia: And what is your problem?

Tarek: My problem is the problem of my age...if we stand still we will die...our age is a launched rocket, and it burns up if it slows down.

Nadia: I won't be an obstacle in your way, Tarek.

Tarek: I know that you will not do that...but I also know that you wonder why I'm dealing with the problem so coldly. You may accuse me of belonging to an age that evaluates something only after it is finished...but I don't think you have any chance to change my point of view.

Nadia: Do you think somebody like me ever could change your point of view?!

Tarek: Well, perhaps I do...but only if the change is for the best...it is impossible for me to live in the past. If Hamlet hadn't busied himself with that investigation, what could he have done?...The requirements of his static age were different from those of our dynamic age which always demands continuous change and inventions.
Nadia: Of course our age is different... and you don't need to convince me of that... besides, that's not the point in our discussion. All I want to know is one thing: Do I have to stay in this house?

Tarek: Do you want to leave this house?!

Nadia: I thought of it a long time ago... but I preferred to wait until you came back.

The Mother: Where can a girl like you go?

Nadia: That's my own business.

Tarek: Let her decide for herself. I think you will be surprised if I tell you that I agree with her completely.

The Mother: Do you really agree with her?!

Tarek: In fact I was thinking about the same thing a few minutes ago... not for Nadia alone... but for me also.

The Mother: You too?

Tarek: I think that's the only solution... Nadia and I will move out.

Nadia: Thank you, Tarek.

The Mother: This means that you believe her?!

Tarek: My decision has nothing to do with believing her or not... It is better that you live your life and we both live our own.

The Mother: Does that mean that I am not going to see you any more?

Tarek: What gave you that idea?

The Mother: Will I see you then?

Tarek: If you want to.

The Mother: Of course... I do.

Tarek: Mother... you should get used to your new life. (The door bell rings)
Hamdi: Who do you think it is?

Samira: (Getting up) I'll find out.

Hamdi: (Getting up) Wait until we cover the wall.

They both cover the wall. Samira goes to open the door, and then she comes back carrying a card.

Samira: The building caretaker gave me this card...it is from one of your friends at the café.

Hamdi: Read it to me, please.

Samira: It is from someone called Shaker.

Hamdi: God damn him!

Samira: Listen: "On behalf of all my friends I would like to tell you the biggest news."

Hamdi: What biggest news?!...The outbreak of the Third World War? Or the victory over hunger?

Samira: No, wait: "The victory of Abou Affan over Abou-Darsh in a fantastic backgammon game."

Hamdi: (Snatches the card from Samira's hand, tears it and throws it away yelling) Nonsense...nonsense.
ACT III

The same living room. The wall is still covered. Samira comes in dusting the chairs, and then Hamdi comes in tying his necktie getting ready to go out.

Hamdi: I wish I didn't have to work!
Samira: But you have to go!
Hamdi: All I do there is just guard the files.
Samira: It's your only way to earn a living.
Hamdi: (Sarcastically) It is a very productive job!!!
Samira: Are you making fun of your job now?...You were always proud that you were the key of the cabinet!
Hamdi: Just a useless key...
Samira: You admit that now!...
Hamdi: My way of thinking has improved.
Samira: Hamdi, do you remember that beautiful melody the girl was playing?
Hamdi: Do you mean Nadia?
Samira: Yes...I know it by heart now...I tried to play it on the piano.
Hamdi: What kept you from doing that?
Samira: Sand and dust cover the piano!...I never played it after our marriage.
Hamdi: Do you hold me responsible for that?!
Samira: Well, you never encouraged me!
Hamdi: What happened to make you want to play again?
Samira: I feel a change!
Hamdi: In you?
Samira: Yes...and in you too.

Hamdi: I admit it...I am ready to listen to you play...clean the piano, and I'll come back as soon as I get off work. That silly job.

Samira: Will you be going out at night?

Hamdi: You mean to the café?...No...I'll stay here with you and Nadia and Tarek.

Samira: *(Turning toward the wall)* How come we don't hear them any more?

Hamdi: Please, Samira, don't remove the cover until I come back.

Samira: Of course...but...I don't hear them saying anything!

She comes closer to the cover and looks behind it and then she cries out in fear:

Hamdi: What happened!...what happened!

Samira: *(Loudly)* The wall...the wall!

Hamdi: *(Removes the cover very quickly)* Oh! what a terrible thing!

Samira: Alas...what a catastrophe!

Hamdi: It was that little peel we saw at the beginning.

Samira: Yes...that was the start.

Hamdi: That fast?!...How could it happen that fast?!

Samira: In just one night?!

Hamdi: Yes...just one night!

Samira: There's nothing left on the wall!

Hamdi: Not even a little shadow.

Samira: Look there, Hamdi!

Hamdi: Where?...

Samira: At the bottom of the wall...a pile of sand and broken peels.

Hamdi: That's all that's left...how terrible.
Samira: What can we do then?
Hamdi: Nothing.
Samira: Nadia...Tarek...the mother...Nadia...
Hamdi: I know.
Samira: Aren't we going to see them or hear them again?
Hamdi: How!
Samira: That's impossible...we got used to them!
Hamdi: (Sadly) Yes...we got used to them.
Samira: Nadia...and the piano...and the beautiful tune...
Hamdi: And Tarek...and his ideas...
Samira: And the interesting conversation...
Hamdi: And the highly sophisticated discussions...
Samira: Is it all gone?!...As if it never happened!
Hamdi: It's a loss...it's a real loss.
Samira: But that's impossible!
Hamdi: Unfortunately it happened.
Samira: That fast?!...
Hamdi: We should have expected that...but that thought never occurred to us.
Hamdi: We were too involved with their problems.
Hamdi: You are right.
Samira: We even forgot ourselves.
Hamdi: We never thought it would end like that!
Samira: I wish we had fixed that small peel from the beginning.
Hamdi: I don't think it would have helped at all!
Samira: I can't believe that it happened!
Hamdi: Neither can I!
Samira: Where do you think they went?
Hamdi: Who are you talking about?!
Samira: Nadia and her mother and Tarek...
Hamdi: Does anybody know?
Samira: Can't we find out?
Hamdi: Did we know where they came from?
Samira: You are right...you are right.
Hamdi: We knew them...and we liked them...and that was all.
Samira: Yes...we did like them.
Hamdi: Time with them went very fast.
Samira: Yes indeed...but couldn't they stay with us longer?
Hamdi: That was possible...but who is to make the decision?
Samira: That's true.
Hamdi: Here we are alone again.
Samira: Yes...alone...
Hamdi: What are we going to do after today?
Samira: The same as before...of course you'll go back to your friends and your backgammon.
Hamdi: No...never.
Samira: Aren't you going back?!
Hamdi: No...I don't feel like it any more.
Samira: You are right. (Deep silence)
Hamdi: I have a wonderful idea.
Samira: Say it quickly, please.
Hamdi: Your neighbor.
Samira: Atiyyat!...what about her?
Hamdi: Didn't all that happen because she washed her floor?
Samira: Do you mean--
Hamdi: Yes I do...if she washes her floor again...don't you think it is possible--
Samira: That they will come back?
Hamdi: Why not?
Samira: Do you think so?
Hamdi: It's very possible... didn't they come that way?
Samira: It is possible then.
Hamdi: The most important thing is that Atiyyat washes her floor.
Samira: Suppose she does not?
Hamdi: Then they'll never come back.
Samira: Then she has to wash her floor.
Hamdi: And the water has to come down our wall.
Samira: That's necessary...yes it's very necessary.
Hamdi: But how can we do it?
Samira: Let's ask her to do that.
Hamdi: How can we ask her something like that?!
Samira: Wait...(She goes to the window and calls) Atiyyat...Atiyyat...
Atiyyat: (Outside) What do you want, Samira?
Samira: Would you please stop by on your way down.
Atiyyat: Is anything the matter?
Samira: No.
Atiyyat: OK...I'll come down soon.

Samira: *(Goes back to her husband)* She's coming down. But you may be late to your work!

Hamdi: That's not important...I'll take a day off if necessary.

Samira: *(Rubs her hands)* I hope it works!

Hamdi: So do I. *(The door bell rings)*

Samira: She's here...be ready. *(She goes, opens the door and comes back)*

Atiyyat: Good morning Mr. Hamdi.

Hamdi: Good morning Mrs. Atiyyat...please sit on this comfortable chair.

Samira...bring some coffee for Mrs. Atiyyat.

Atiyyat: No thank you...I had my coffee fifteen minutes ago.

Samira: Some tea then?

Atiyyat: No thank you.

Samira: You're looking good...Knock on wood!

Atiyyat: Thank you.

Hamdi: Since that wall incident--

Atiyyat: *(Looks at the wall)* Oh! What happened?

Hamdi: It peeled off last night.

Atiyyat: I think I have done my part. I sent you a painter, but you kicked him out.

Hamdi: We will never forget that good deed of yours.

Samira: We hope we can return the favor.

Hamdi: I hope that incident did not prevent you from washing your floor!

Atiyyat: Well...I have to keep you happy.
Hamdi: But that's not fair...you're not supposed to leave your floor dirty to keep us happy!

Samira: He's right...please go up and wash your apartment...even drown it with water.

Atiyyat: Drown it?!...

Hamdi: Yes...like last time...don't worry about us...you are free to do anything you want!

Atiyyat: Of course I am free...but it's also my duty to keep my neighbors satisfied.

Hamdi: We are your neighbors...we give you permission to do anything you like.

Samira: Wash your floor and don't worry!

Atiyyat: I washed my floor...and I always do!

Samira: You washed it?!...

Hamdi: When?

Atiyyat: Every morning...but I do it in a different way now.

Samira: How do you do it?

Atiyyat: I scrub it with a wet rag.

Samira: But that's not enough!

Atiyyat: On the contrary...it cleans much better.

Hamdi: Be generous in pouring water...it won't bother us.

Atiyyat: You can be sure that no water will come down to you...I am doing it differently now.

Samira: Please...do it as you used to do it before.

Atiyyat: No...I know better now. Anyway I think I know what you have in mind...you want me to stain your wall so you can sue me for repairing the whole thing...I am not that stupid. May God forgive you and goodbye.
(Samira tries to grab her but can't. Atiyyat is going too fast)

Samira: We failed.
Hamdi: Yes...we did.
Samira: I wish we had told her the truth!
Hamdi: What truth?
Samira: Nadia...and Tarek...and--
Hamdi: We would have had the same result.
Samira: Why?
Hamdi: Because she wouldn't believe it.
Samira: Oh...I miss Nadia and her piano.
Hamdi: And Tarek and his project and his genius. What is going to happen to the project now?...It was going to change the whole world.
Samira: They've got to come back.
Hamdi: How can we solve this problem?
Samira: The only way is by washing the neighbor's floor again.
Hamdi: But she refuses to do that.
Samira: It's hard to convince her...but I have an idea.
Hamdi: What is it?
Samira: Let's wash her floor ourselves.
Hamdi: That's a good idea...but how can we get into her apartment?
Samira: There is a pipe outside between our window and hers...you can climb it.
Hamdi: Do you think I can do it?
Samira: Give it a try...one of us has to do it.
Hamdi: OK...show me that pipe! (They both go towards the window)
Samira: Her window is open...and she's out now as usual.

Hamdi: Is that the pipe?!

Samira: Yes it is.

Hamdi: Suppose I slid down!

Samira: Be careful.

Hamdi takes his shoes off, and Samira helps him climb out the window. With some difficulty Hamdi climbs the pipe and reaches Atiyyat's window, and gets into the apartment. After a few minutes Samira sees some water coming down the wall...

Samira: (Calling from the window) Hamdi...Come down...now.

Hamdi: (Outside) Is it working?

Samira: Yes it is.

Hamdi: (Outside) I'm coming down.

Samira: Easy...easy...

Hamdi: Coming down is a lot easier.

Samira: OK...but be careful.

Hamdi: (On the edge of the window) Help me, please. (Samira helps him come down the window)

Samira: Your shirt is dirty.

Hamdi: (Trying to clean his clothes) Of course.

Samira: What did you do?

Hamdi: I turned the faucet on all the way.

Samira: There's some water coming down.

Hamdi: I hope it works.

Samira: Hamdi...it's just drawing a line.

Hamdi: I think you're right.
Samira: I know what's wrong...we have to do exactly what she did the last time. She said she washed it with soap and water.

Hamdi: Soap?

Samira: Yes...soap and water. Maybe that helped.

Hamdi: Do you want me to go up again and wash her apartment with soap and water?

Samira: I think you better.

Hamdi: Suppose she is using a different kind of soap now?

Samira: That will be too bad.

Hamdi: Then we'll have to ask her about the kind of soap she was using!

Samira: Don't complicate matters too much...let's give it a try.

(Atiyyat's yelling comes through the window)

Atiyyat: (Outside) Samira...Samira.

Samira: (Goes to the window) What do you want?

Atiyyat: My apartment is drowned with water...I think a thief came to my apartment.

Samira: A thief?

Atiyyat: Is there any water on your wall?

Samira: I think so.

Hamdi: (Whispering) Tell her...tell her.

Samira: No.

Atiyyat: I am coming down to check it myself!

Samira: (To her husband) Put your shoes on quickly!...She's coming down.

Hamdi: (Putting his shoes on) I hope she doesn't suspect us.

Samira: Don't worry, we will convince her that we have nothing to do with it...but what are we going to do later?
Hamdi: What do you mean?

Samira: I mean when we go to her apartment again and wash it with soap and water.

Hamdi: That's impossible...we can convince her this time that she forgot to shut the faucet off, but we cannot tell her that she forgot that she washed her apartment with soap and water. We have to find another solution. (The door bell rings)

Samira: There she comes.

Atiyyat: (Coming in) I am glad I came home when I did. (She looks at the wall) Your wall is stained again.

Samira: It's all right.

Atiyyat: Who do you think came to my apartment and did that?

Samira: Why do you think that somebody came to your apartment?

Atiyyat: Because that was done by someone.

Hamdi: Did he steal anything?

Atiyyat: No.

Hamdi: Then it isn't a thief.

Atiyyat: I don't understand.

Hamdi: Do you think a thief would just come to turn your faucet on?... That would be crazy.

Atiyyat: That's strange.

Hamdi: Do you have your apartment key?

Atiyyat: Yes...it's in my pocket.

Hamdi: How could that person get in then?

Atiyyat: From the window...I should have closed it before I left.

Hamdi: Nobody could climb the pipe unless he was very professional.

Atiyyat: Then he is a professional thief.
Hamdi: I told you it couldn't be a thief...otherwise he would've stolen something. I think you forgot to turn the faucet off.

Atiyyat: That's impossible...I always make sure that all the faucets are tightly closed.

Hamdi: I am sure you forgot.

Atiyyat: It's impossible...what are you planning to do?

Samira: About what?

Atiyyat: About your wall!

Samira: That's not important.

Hamdi: You look like you don't trust us...I'll prove to you that we mean no harm. I'll write you a statement that I will not sue you for anything and I'll sign it too. (Samira brings a pencil and paper. Hamdi writes on it and then hands it to Atiyyat)

Atiyyat: That's too much...you are very nice neighbors.

Samira: I have a suggestion for you.

Atiyyat: What is it?

Samira: My husband and I would like to help you wash your apartment every morning.

Atiyyat: That's too much...I cannot accept that.

Samira: Please do.

Hamdi: My wife and I have decided to help you wash your apartment with soap and water. Do you have soap?...The soap you were using before?

Atiyyat: What soap?!

Hamdi: We will tell you later...let's go upstairs now. Samira...bring the brooms and the bucket.

Atiyyat: I have brooms upstairs...but I can't let you do that.
Samira: It will make us very happy.

Hamdi: It's a big honor for us. (The three of them go upstairs; Atiyyat is in the middle. She looks very nervous and perplexed)

Temporary Curtain

A certain period of time has passed. The curtain is raised. We see the same room; everything indicates that a certain time has passed. There is a desk in front of the wall, and another desk in some other part of the room with some papers and a microscope on top. Hamdi is looking in the microscope. Samira comes in with a tray of coffee. She puts the coffee near Hamdi.

Samira: Here's your coffee. (Hamdi is too busy; he does not say anything)

Samira: Did you reach any results?

Hamdi: No.

Samira: You are just wasting your time.

Hamdi: (Raises his head) I told you to forget all about that subject... I almost forgot about it.

Samira: So did I.

Hamdi: But do you think after all the ridiculous things we did we can--

Samira: (Laughing) Indeed...every time I remember our going up to Atiyyat's--

Hamdi: We almost wore the ceiling and the wall out with all the soap and water we used.

Samira: I don't think we had anything to lose...at least that experience led you to a respectable hobby. (She points to the microscope)

Hamdi: I really regret that first period of my life which I wasted for nothing.

Samira: You can start anew.
Hamdi: But it won't be the same.

Samira: At least you are not wasting your time now.

Hamdi: The time I have is not enough to study everything I want. Every time I open a new book I feel that I am getting more and more ignorant.

Samira: By the way...I have the book "The Civilization of the Ancient Greeks"...it's under my pillow. I'll put it back in the bookcase when I am done.

Hamdi: (As if talking to himself) But I know my limits!

Samira: Drink your coffee first.

Hamdi: (Holding the cup) OK.

Samira: I think it's getting cold as usual.

Hamdi: I am used to cold coffee since I bought this microscope.

Samira: It cost us all the jewelry I had...but I don't regret it...we had to try everything.

Hamdi: Of course...we had to examine that sand and the broken peels. I don't know anything about microscopes...but it seemed to me--

Samira: It seemed to you that when you put the sand and the broken peels under that microscope, then you would know the secret.

Hamdi: I was very naive...it is like all sand. But can you deny the pleasure in looking through this microscope?

Samira: The pleasure it gives me is that it makes you look like a scientist.

Hamdi: Now quit making fun of me!...I'll never be a scientist...it's too late...all I can do is love science.

Samira: I am not making fun of you...I really admire you.

Hamdi: It's an astonishing world...come and look through this lens...do you see that mosquito?...You will see it now as big as an elephant.
What's the difference then between an elephant and a mosquito?

Samira: You showed me a bug once.

Hamdi: What did it look like?

Samira: It looked like a cow!

Hamdi: It's astonishing...everything around us is astonishing...but we never paid attention to that before.

Samira: Because we were busy doing other things.

Hamdi: All I can do now is look at things and admire them...but I don't understand anything.

Samira: We couldn't help it!...we never understood who the members of that family were!...Who were they?...Who were they?

Hamdi: Nadia and her mother and Tarek?

Samira: Yes...who were they?...Were they real or just a mere imagination?

Hamdi: Just a mere imagination.

Samira: They were the work of our heads!

Hamdi: Our heads?!...Our heads were empty then...do you deny that those people were better than us?

Samira: Where are they now?

Hamdi: I don't care any more...please don't bring up that question again...didn't we agree not to bring up the subject again?!

Samira: Yes...we did.

Hamdi: Keep quiet then!...the most important thing now is to live a useful life. (Samira looks down and Hamdi continues his work. He opens a book then takes a pen and a piece of paper and starts writing)

Samira: (Still looking down) The piano keys are loose...didn't you notice that!?
Hamdi: *Very occupied* No...well, maybe yes.

Samira: *Thinks for a while and then suddenly* If Nadia and her mother and Tarek were mere imagination...why can't we be like that too?!

Hamdi: *Looking at her* What are you saying?

Samira: *Standing up* You are too busy with your book...I'll go and mind my own business. *(The door bell rings)*

Samira: The bell rings!...I wonder who it is! *(Goes out to open the door and comes back with Atiyyat)*

Atiyyat: Good evening, mister.

Hamdi: *Raises his head* Good evening Mrs. Atiyyat.

Atiyyat: *(To Samira in a very sarcastic manner)* Is he a doctor now?!

Samira: No.

Atiyyat: *(Pointing to the microscope)* But--

Samira: You mean the microscope?

Atiyyat: What is it called?

Samira: Mi...cro...scope.

Atiyyat: I know...I know...I've seen something like it when I went to the laboratory for blood analysis.

Samira: Shall I make you some coffee?

Atiyyat: No, thank you...I came to ask you a favor.

Samira: What can we do for you?

Atiyyat: I have to go out of town for about two weeks...and I wonder if you can take care of my cat for me!

Samira: With pleasure...your cat will be safe with us.

Atiyyat: I am sure of that...but there's one thing that's bothering me.

Samira: What is it?
Atiyyat: I think Mr. Hamdi doesn't like me any more...every time we meet on the stairs he turns his face away and doesn't say anything to me.

Samira: I am sure he doesn't mean it...but nowadays his mind is very occupied.

Atiyyat: Is there anything wrong?

Samira: No...he's just writing a book.

Atiyyat: A book?!

Hamdi: (Looking at Atiyyat) The subject may interest you.

Atiyyat: Interest me?!

Hamdi: Sure...wouldn't you like to buy a pound of meat for one penny?

Atiyyat: A pound of meat for one penny?!...Where?

Hamdi: Everywhere.

Atiyyat: Just one penny?!...I think I heard that from you before.

Hamdi: Maybe for no money at all.

Atiyyat: Where is that?...It can't be true even in dreams!

Hamdi: Well...this is not a dream.

Atiyyat: Do you think we'll live long enough to see that a pound of meat is free?

Hamdi: And rice...and fruits...and vegetables...and sweets...

Atiyyat: What is it you are saying?

Hamdi: This has to happen...and it will happen some day.

Atiyyat: All people eat for free?!

Samira: The same way as they breathe free...what's the difference?!

Atiyyat: There's enough air...but--

Samira: And food also will be enough.
Atiyyat: It's hard to believe.

Hamdi: People in the past couldn't believe that going to the moon was possible--

Samira: But now it is possible.

Atiyyat: Food will be like air!...how nice!

Samira: There will be no more hunger...the word "hunger" will be eliminated...and when children in the future hear such a word they'll ask their mothers what it means!

Atiyyat: That's great!...but I never yet heard anybody say that a pound of meat will cost a penny...or be free.

Hamdi: That's the problem.

Atiyyat: What problem?!

Hamdi: People do not dream of that yet...at least not with the same force that they dream about reaching the moon.

Samira: Why is that Hamdi?...Do you think that humanity is like a baby who thinks of his toy before his food?

Hamdi: Why don't you say that the people who dream for humanity have never been hungry...and have never felt the hunger of other people?!

Samira: I think that you said it before, Hamdi...people think of reaching the moon and Mars more than they do about eliminating hunger!

Hamdi: Even though eliminating hunger means the elimination of slavery...the slavery of individuals as well as that of peoples.

Atiyyat: (Yelling) I am getting hungry...please let me go upstairs and fix me something to eat!

Samira: Why don't you stay and have supper with us?

Atiyyat: No, thank you...it's enough that I leave my cat with you.

(Atiyyat leaves)
Hamdi: I am trying to think of a title for the book!

Samira: But you're not done writing it yet!

Hamdi: That's true...but sometimes the title gives some inspiration. I don't want a scientific title...because the book is not a book of science.

Samira: I know...it is a book of dreams.

Hamdi: Exactly...it is the dream that precedes science...I am not a scientist...but Tarek is. He was a real scientist...and his project was—as I could understand it—built on a scientific basis... I am only paving the way for Tarek because Tarek will come back.

Samira: Will come back?!

Hamdi: I don't mean Tarek himself...but I mean scientists like him. When he comes back he will find the whole world ready to help him... but first of all people have to live this dream with all their senses.

Samira: (Pointing to the bookcase) The same way these books lived.

Hamdi: Yes...the stories of spaceships and of going to the different planets. All these stories filled the world with imagination and dreams...and after that it was easy to move into science and reality.

Samira: Then you are facing a great difficulty.

Hamdi: I know that.

Samira: Tarek said it himself.

Hamdi: Hunger is a weapon for control and slavery.

Samira: That's why the controllers won't give up their weapons.

Hamdi: You are right!...that was the obstacle in Tarek's way...that's why people have to be awakened...so they can prepare for that distant goal: The journey for the common food.
Samira: The journey for the common food?!!

Hamdi: Yes...that's what Atiyyat said...it's hard to believe.

Samira: People have to keep this hope in mind every day...every hour and every minute so it can come true.

Hamdi: I believe in that too.

Samira: Keep on writing, Hamdi. Do you want some coffee?

Hamdi: Not now...thank you.

Samira: (She looks at the wall while leaving him) I don't really know...is it better to leave the bookcase near the wall...or...

Hamdi: What did you say?

Samira: Nothing.

She leaves. Hamdi keeps working on his book very eagerly. After a few moments he hears the same beautiful tune Nadia used to play.

Hamdi: (He stands up suddenly and cries out with excitement) Nadia!...Nadia!...Nadia!...(He looks at the wall, then he goes to the door and looks outside) Is that you, Samira?!! (He returns back to his desk while the playing of the piano continues outside).

Curtain
COMMENTARY

Al-Hakim's play may seem somewhat simple at first, but the more we think about it the more profound it becomes. The central theme is best explained by the author in the text of a proposal which at one time he prepared to submit to UNESCO, but he finally changed his mind because he realized that circumstances were unfit for such a proposal. A part of that proposal reads as follows:

"I wish that UNESCO would form a planning department such as a Peace Plan Office (P.P.O.) whose sole responsibility is to work for maintaining a project for a permanent peace on earth. This project is—in fact, it has to be—a mere imaginary supposition at the present; that is, it has to be built on scientific suppositions which cannot be implemented at the present time, such as the elimination of hunger, of political boundaries, and of universal fear, etc..."13

At the end of his proposal, al-Hakim made his argument stronger by saying that:

"If traveling in space—although people doubt its direct use to the inhabitants of earth—is looked upon with such interest, then how can we ignore a mere imaginary supposition which is more useful to us and to our existence. All we have to do is find an answer to the following question: How can we reach that planet which is found on our earth and is called: Peace?!"14

Al-Hakim's project is concerned not only with his country, but for humanity in general. What he is asking for is really impossible at the present, and he himself realizes that. He does not set a timetable because he is not sure whether the project will take fifty years or a hundred years
before it comes true, but it must come true.

This theme recurs often, first in the speeches of Tarek and later in those of Hamdi and Samira. Tarek is fully convinced that he can eliminate hunger and make food available for everybody, but there are obstacles that confront his way. That's why the first step is that

"...people have to be awakened...so they can prepare for that distant goal: The journey for the common food."\(^{15}\)

The future of humanity, says al-Hakim, depends on imaginations and dreams. These imaginations and dreams are essential, as we know from past experience. Traveling in space and reaching the moon were mere dreams at the beginning, but now we all know that they are scientifically possible, and they were proven to be so in our lifetime.

al-Hakim wants to stress the importance of these dreams because they are the first step towards success. While talking about "The journey for the common food", Samira speaks for al-Hakim when she says: "People have to keep this hope in mind every day...every hour and every minute so it can come true."\(^{16}\) Similarly, in stressing the importance of dreams that precede reality, there is Hamdi's comment concerning the elimination of hunger: "...people do not dream of that yet...at least not with the same force they dream about reaching the moon."\(^{17}\) He also says in another place: "...the stories of spaceships and of going to the different planets. All these stories filled the world with imagination and dreams...and after that it was easy to move into science and reality."\(^{18}\)

The idea of the project "The food for every mouth" divides the play into two parts: the part before the vision (i.e., before the appearance of
the family on the wall), and the part after the vision. Before the vision
Hamdi and his wife led a very boring and monotonous life. Hamdi spent his
time between office work (which he finally realized was a waste of time)
and the café playing backgammon with his friends. Samira spent her time
at home mending her husband's socks, or making him coffee. After the
vision everything had changed. Life became more interesting and
challenging, and Hamdi felt that he could be a very active member of his
society, and that he had much to offer to the society. He started to
write a book because he considered it to be "...the dream that precedes
science..." and he also considered himself to be "...paving the way for
Tarek because Tarek will come back."20

This very last statement is very powerful and optimistic, and it very
much expresses the belief of al-Hakim that some day somebody will carry
out his plan.

There are other interesting contrasts in the play. After the disap-
pearance of the people on the wall, Hamdi and his wife tried useless and
absurd tricks to bring those people back; but we should think and ask our-
selves: would the return of the people have made any difference? The
answer is no, of course. Hamdi and Samira had received the inspiring
vision and from then on they had to be completely on their own.

As a whole, the play is simple in structure but rich in ideas, and it
is very optimistic. The whole world is beautiful, but it is up to us to
see and enjoy its beauty. Perhaps the most representative lines in the
play are those said by Hamdi: "...everything around us is astonishing...
but we never paid attention to that before."21 It is this theme of
awakening appreciation of the world and its possibilities which places Tawfiq al-Hakim's *The Food For Every Mouth* in the mainstream of modern Arabic literature.
FOOTNOTES


6 Qasim Ami, *Tahrir al-Marjah [Liberation of Women]* (Cairo, 1899), and *al-Marjah al-Jadidah [The New Woman]* (Cairo, 1901). See Sharabi, pp. 92-97.


9 Tawfiq al-Hakim, *Awdat al-Ruh [The Return of the Spirit]*, two parts (Cairo, 1933), *Diary of A Country Magistrate* (Cairo, 1937), and *Bird of the East* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma’aref, 1974).


11 The Trilogy consists of *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (Cairo, 1956), *Qasr al-Shawq* and *al-Sukkariyya* (Cairo, 1957).
al-Hakim said that he was born in 1898, but some critics insist that he was born in 1903 because he mentioned in *The Return of the Spirit* that the boy Muhsen—who represents Tawfiq al-Hakim—was fifteen years old when the Revolution of 1919 took place. See *The Return of the Spirit*, Part I, pp. 121-123, and Part II, pp. 213-214.

"Proposal to UNESCO," appended to the Arabic edition of *The Food For Every Mouth* [al-Ta'am Li-Kull Fam] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Adab, [1970]), p. 189.

Ibid., pp. 190-191.

Translation, p. 75.

Ibid., p. 76.

Ibid., p. 74.

Ibid., p. 75.

Idem.

Idem.

Ibid., p. 71.


al-Hakim, Tawfiq. al-Ta'am Li-Kull Fam [The Food For Every Mouth]. Cairo: Maktabat al-Abab, [1970].


