

*Nessim Zohar*

TWO STORIES

Nessim Zohar, born in Alexandria, is a playwright and performer. He immigrated to Israel in 1950 and began his acting career with the Haifa Repertory Company. After receiving a grant for most promising young actor, he lived for several years in New York, where he attended the H.B. Professional Acting Workshop and studied filmmaking at New York University. During his long career, he played leads and major roles in all the repertory theaters in Israel and appeared on television, radio and in films. He has written scripts for film and theater and has published a collection of short stories and a bestselling novel.

*BLUE THUNDER*

"You were set up, Mister Leon!"

Leon Alfandari sat by his usual table at the Shatbey casino, counting the amber prayer beads in his hand with the detached, measured movements of an automaton. Leon was not a religious man, nor was he even a Muslim. Still he was forever toying with his genuine amber prayer-bead string. He had picked up the habit on his first day at the racetrack, when, together with his now departed friend Ahmed Razek, they had placed their first bet.

"Kiss the prayer beads for luck!"

Ahmed had kissed his prayer beads and now urged Leon to do the same. "Luck for Ahmed and myself," Leon responded, amused, and brought the beads to his lips. Their bet won, but when Ahmed repeated the ritual on the next bet, Leon refused to oblige. "Come on, Ahmed, you know I don't believe in this sort of thing," he said genially. They lost that bet and all the following ones.

"All you have to do is kiss the beads!" pleaded Ahmed. They were placing their last bet for the day, and Ahmed was eager for another success.

"You have been kissing them all day long, and it hasn't seemed to help."

"Maybe the beads like you and not me! Don't give me that sort of look; there is such a thing as a bond between a talisman and its owner!"

"The beads are yours, so that bond should exist between you two. I am an outsider!"

"Not if the beads have picked you as their rightful owner!"

Leon waved his hands in a gesture of total despair.

"Kiss them, and I will raise the odds ten to one!"

"You will lose all your weekly allowance!" said Leon, kissing the beads to humor his friend.

The ten-to-one gamble earned them back all their losses of that day, with some extra cash to spend at one of the seaside cafes.

"Here," said Ahmed, presenting the prayer beads to Leon. "They have unquestionably picked you as their rightful owner."

Leon Alfandari stopped toying with the beads and sank into a long silence.

"You were set up, Mister Leon!" repeated Gaafar el Gaza'ar, debt collector and muscleman, expert in matters beyond the realm of civilized negotiations.

"Let's order dinner first," answered Leon, snapping out of his reverie.

"I'll have Sayadeya fish."

"Great." Leon clapped his hands, summoning Ali, the headwaiter, "Two Sayadeya fish casseroles, Ali."

They pursued their business meeting only after the kitchen helper had cleared the table and Ali had set before them two glowing water pipes.

"Cheers!" called Leon Alfandari, as Gaafar belched loudly. According to etiquette, Alfandari responded with an even deeper belch, the sonority of which would not have shamed Tito Gobi.

"Cheers!" congratulated the patrons sitting close by.

The two men drew on their hookahs, exhaling towards the ceiling a thin, continuous jet of richly scented smoke.

Ali approached with two glasses of sweet, dark tea.

"Thank you, Ali."

"At your service, Master Alfandari."

A gentle breeze caressed Leon Alfandari's thinning hair as he turned towards the sea to enjoy the coolness of the salty evening air. Enchanted by the movement of the waves and the lullaby played by the bubbling surf, Leon gazed at the water, allowing a slight smile to soften his stony features.

"The tea is very good," he said, giving Gaafar the cue to continue his report.

"We were set up, Mister Leon!" he said, including himself among the cheated as a token of loyalty and in order to avoid unnecessary suspicion.

Gaafar held the scalding tea-glass between his thumb and his third finger, making contact only with the tepid rim and the thick, insulated bottom. Carefully raising the hot beverage to his lips, he took a quick, noisy sip, drawing in a rush of fresh air together with the tea in order to lower the temperature of the potation as it traveled from the glass to his mouth.

"Excellent tea," he said, taking another noisy sip. "Yes sir, we were set up!"

"I believe you've said that already," answered Leon, picking up his tea in the gentleman's fashion, holding the glass by its rim and keeping his index and little finger in the air, away from the hot glass.

"Excellent tea indeed," he confirmed, after taking in his turn a long, noisy sip. "Now, my dear Gaafar, I would like to know who set us up, and how."

Gaafar ceremoniously waited for Leon to put down his glass.

"Well, sir, I got hold of the stable boy and shoved hot Shata peppers up his arse. He started singing at once! You know, I peel the skin off the peppers so that the vitriolic meat of the pod is in direct contact ..."

"Please stick to what you found out."

"Sure," said Gaafar, disappointed by the lack of interest manifested by his employer towards his methods of extracting information.

"Blue Thunder was drugged. They gave him a powerful laxative. All night long, he was shitting his guts

out – excuse the language. The stable boy was bribed to clean the stall so as to arouse no suspicion.

"What else?"

"I got hold of the stable master at Smouha racecourse. I shoved hot Shata peppers up his ... sorry. Anyway, he admitted mixing a full bottle of Agarol into Blue Thunder's oats. I once had a spoonful of Agarol after eating too many prickly figs, Allah help the Armenian pharmacist! I almost died sitting on the toilet. Can you imagine what a whole bottle can do?"

Leon Alfandari, bookmaker and racehorse expert, did not have to use his imagination. He had been in his box in the stands when the eight horses shot across the starting line of the weekly one-mile sweepstake. Blue Thunder was a born miler, galloping all the way at a fast, steady pace. So was Desert Prince. They both held the central lanes and a hundred yards into the race were already a full length ahead of the pack. Three hundred yards into the race, and Leon did not need his binoculars to see that something was wrong, though the two horses were still galloping neck and neck.

Five hundred yards into the race, Desert Prince was leading by a length, and the crowd was on its feet. To this day, Blue Thunder had never lost a mile race! Leon slowly picked up his binoculars. The horses were now approaching the stretch closest to the stands. Leon distinguished a slight, unsteady wobble of Blue Thunder's head. Apart from the chalky white foam around the nostrils, the muzzle was dry, and it seemed as though the horse's eyes were popping out of their sockets. Leon put down his binoculars.

Eight hundred yards, and Blue Thunder crashed head over heels into the turf, sending his jockey over the fence. The crowd was quiet, training their binoculars from the horse to Leon and back again.

"Did you find out who was behind it?"

"Sure I did! I got hold of the betting controller and shoved ..."

"Gaafar ..."

"Yes, of course. Anyway, Nazim Shoukri is behind it. Many bettors all over town, mostly riffraff, putting ten to one against Blue Thunder. Small bets so as not to arouse suspicion."

"Nazim Shoukri?"

"Sure, Mister Leon. He funded the whole thing. He picked the sweepstake so no one could trace the winnings. Would you like me to get hold of him ...?"

"Patience is a gift from Allah, Gaafar."

The information extracted by the hot Shata peppers only reinforced what Leon already knew. Long before Blue Thunder failed to make it to the finish line, Leon



A hookah shop.



Tamarind vendor.

Alfandari had realized that he was a marked man.

"Nazim Shoukri is the bloodhound," thought Leon. "The hunters will follow later."

"Zionist's intestines!"

"What?"

"Zionist's intestines, sir; only a piaster, sir. Zionist's intestines!"

A young, barefoot peddler, no more than ten years old, stood in front of Leon holding a bunch of thin, twisted, rosy balloons.

"Zionist's intestines, sir."

Gaafar pushed the boy away and turned uncomfortably towards Leon, "His error is on my head, Mister Leon," he said, atoning for the peddler's insensitive blunder.

"He could not have known," answered Leon. "The prayer beads must have misled him."

"That is not the point, Mister Leon. Those silly balloons are offending to me, too!"

Leon nodded in appreciation of Gaafar's friendly gesture and busied himself with the small brass tongs attached to the crown of his water pipe.

"Zionist's intestines indeed," he thought, stacking red-hot cinders onto the tobacco of his smoke. "There were days when I would have clouted that ignorant little lout! But times have changed, and Leon Alfandari has become an easy target."

Leon laid the minuscule brass tongs back onto the platter of the water pipe and pulled his chair closer to the table. From his jacket's inner pocket, he withdrew an envelope and slid it across the table towards Gaafar, who opened it and hurriedly put it back, as though bitten by a snake.

The envelope contained at least a hundred pounds in crisp new one-pound notes! "This is the kind of money someone pays for elimination and disposal," thought

Gaafar, pushing the envelope back towards Leon.

"Sorry, Mister Alfandari, I don't do that sort of thing!"

"You don't have to do anything. It's your fee for a job well done!"

"One hundred pounds? It doesn't make sense. Ten would have been very generous. A hundred? What is it, toy money you give to children?"

Leon leaned forward, indicating to Gaafar to do the same.

"You are almost right, Gaafar," he whispered, "but it is not toy money. It is counterfeit money! And there is no way to detect the forgery."

The stem of the hookah hit the floor with a dull sound as Gaafar opened both his hands in astonishment.

"You, Mister Alfandari?" he whispered in total amazement. "Impossible!"

"See for yourself," continued Leon, before his listener could regain his breath. "Check any number of notes – anywhere you like! Go to the police, go to the bank. ... Check the money!"

Gaafar lifted the stem of the hookah from the floor, wiped the mouthpiece on the sleeve of his striped galabeya, and drew an enormous amount of smoke, making the water boil madly in the glass container.

A hundred pounds is indeed a lot of money, counterfeit or not. One could live for a year on a hundred pounds! With a hundred pounds one could cure the trachoma plaguing the eyes of one's daughter. With a hundred pounds ....

Gaafar sat motionless for a long moment, during which Leon, honoring his friend's silence, turned his gaze towards the sea. Glittering light was dancing upon the crest of the shallow waves, while on the horizon across

the eastern harbor the tall minaret of the New Mosque appeared to pierce the golden disc of the setting sun. How on earth he would ever be able to leave Alexandria was beyond his imagination.

Suddenly Gaafar pocketed the envelope, stood up, and left without bidding Leon goodbye. On his way he caught the balloon peddler by the ear and dragged him, screaming, out of the casino.

"Bless your soul, Gaafar," smiled Leon to himself. "Alexandrians are still honorable men!"

At the Anfoushi police station, Gaafar submitted a complaint for fraud and handed over two one-pound notes for a confirmation of authenticity.

"The money is good," said the police expert, handing back only one of the notes. "The second pound note was ruined by the testing procedure," he added sheepishly as Gaafar left the station.

"I told you it is a perfect forgery!" laughed Leon. "Here, take another fifty!"

"These I will take to El Laban police station," jested Gaafar.

"There, both notes will be destroyed." The two men burst into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

"I don't understand, Mister Leon," said Gaafar, wiping tears from his eyes. "If the forgery is so good, why doesn't the counterfeiter use the money himself? He could become a millionaire!"

"Tell me, Gaafar," replied Leon in a fatherly manner, "does a peasant grow tomatoes to eat them himself or to sell them in the market?"

Gaafar smiled at the proposition and was about to pose the next question when Leon stopped him.

"The less said, the better."

Gaafar was pleased with the confidence given to him, yet Leon knew he would spill the beans, and the news about the incredible counterfeit notes would spread like wildfire. That was exactly what he was aiming at.

That same night, the telephone started ringing as some of his acquaintances, sniffing for a deal, started calling. Leon evaded the issue, blaming the caller for being a tasteless practical joker or declaring that the whole matter was a malicious rumor spread by his enemies. It took two days before the caller he had prayed for was on the other end of the line.

"How are you, Mister Leon?"

He recognized the voice at once. "The fish has spotted the bait," he thought, enjoying the pleasant warmth generated by this revelation.

"I shall be honest with you, dear Shoukri. Times are hard. The unexpected fiasco with Blue Thunder put me in a very delicate position."

"In our line of business you have honey one day, onions the other. You should have spread your debts."

"That would be a deathblow to my reputation and credibility, dear Nazim."

Both men were assessing each other's position by way of the expected small talk.

"Rumor has it that Blue Thunder's crash cost you five thousand pounds!"

"Money comes and money goes, dear friend," answered Leon, giving no foothold to his adversary.

"I hear you have come by some interesting merchandise."

"Interesting only to someone who is curious," answered Leon. If Nazim wanted part of the action, he would have to spring the question directly.

"I was under the impression you never deal with this sort of goods. After all, your people are commanded not to defile their souls."

"One has to make a living, honorable Shoukri." Leon swallowed the insult. It was not a time for crossing swords.

"Are the goods available for inspection?"

"Only in Cairo, Mister Shoukri. The stock is in Cairo. They sell in units of ten thousand pieces. The price – two to one!"

"That's madness Leon! No one will buy at that price! It's pure madness!"

"Not for this merchandise, Master Shoukri, not for this merchandise. You double your investment with every turnover!"

"I have to check with my investors. Five thousand is unheard of."

Feeling a flush rise on his stony face, Leon hung up. If the fish had swallowed the bait, he would surely call back.

A week later, Leon Alfandari and Gaafar el Gaza'ar rang the bell of a small apartment in the center of Cairo. Gaafar was carrying a brown leather valise. Nazim Shoukri opened the door.

"Ten thousand in one-pound denominations," announced Leon, once the door was securely shut behind him. "As agreed, Gaafar is the trustee. He holds the money until the final execution of the deal. He will render for inspection any number of bills you require. I'll wait for you here."

Nazim Shoukri hurriedly left the flat, accompanied by Gaafar carrying the brown leather valise. In the early hours of the afternoon, they both returned from their proofing trip among the banks, exchangers, and forgers of Cairo.

"Unbelievable, Master Alfandari!" exclaimed Nazim





Shoukri to the impassive Leon, who noted that the excited Shoukri now addressed him by his last name.

"Incredible! I took the money everywhere! I even ventured to Giorgi Salimidis. He must have checked half the bills. 'The money is true,' he says. 'Forged,' I tell him. 'True,' he bellows. 'Forged,' I shout. He almost hit me!"

"Salimidis is a small-time counterfeiter," replied Leon, counting his prayer beads with deliberate calm. "He is not in the same league with my suppliers."

"I called my partners in Alex. They may want to increase the order."

For an imperceptible moment the prayer beads halted in Leon's hand.

"Ten thousand a month, not a piaster more. My suppliers are very cautious."

"Then I would like to place an order for next month!" shot Nazim.

"Haste is the devil's way, dear Nazim. Until next month, Allah will decide! Let us first finalize this transaction."

Nazim Shoukri opened his shirt, and, as is the custom of rural folk, produced five thousand pounds – the price of the counterfeit money – from within a wide linen belt that girdled his belly. In an act of total confidence, Leon took the money without counting the bills. Gaafar handed over the brown leather valise to Nazim Shoukri, and all three men left for the central train station.

"Gaafar and I will be getting off at Tanta," said Leon. "It would not be wise for us to arrive in Alexandria together."

At Tanta station, Leon and Gaafar descended, bidding Nazim a successful completion of the journey.

"Now to the stationmaster!" announced Leon the minute the train had left the station.

"Why the stationmaster, Mister Leon?"

Leon only smiled and entered the office, leaving a

bewildered Gaafar on the platform.

"What can I do for you, Your Highness?" asked the stationmaster, addressing Leon with excessive heartiness and pomp, in anticipation of a large tip.

"I forgot a piece of luggage on the train that just left for Alexandria," Leon informed him, and he gave a full description of the brown leather valise.

"Does Your Excellency by any chance also remember the seat number?"

"Of course," replied Leon, handing over the tickets together with a ten-pound note to cover "any unexpected expense." The stationmaster took vigorous and immediate action.

At Damanhor, six uniformed policemen boarded the train, heading directly towards the coach where Nazim Shoukri was sitting with the brown valise. Four of them blocked the entrances while the remaining two, leaving nothing to chance, checked every single piece of luggage along their way. By the time they stopped by the brown valise, Nazim Shoukri was on the verge of hysteria. The possibility of spending ten years in one of His Majesty's prisons for dealing in counterfeit currency wore his nerves to a thread, and cold perspiration trickled down his spine.

"Is that yours?" asked the police officer in a stern tone, as is the wont of policemen.

"No!" shrieked Shoukri, "I have no luggage. This valise belongs to a passenger who got off in Tanta. He wore a white suit. Looked Jewish to me ... very fishy."

The policemen took the brown leather valise and got off the train, paying no attention to Nazim's nervous chatter.

"Ayoooo!" bellowed Gaafar. "You have cleaned Nazim of five thousand pounds! He will be looking for you."

"Why should he be looking for me?" wondered Leon innocently. "I kept my end of the deal!"

"Sure, but the police returned the suitcase, with the money, to you!"

"That is something only you and I are aware of!"

"And the police. Nazim will try to find out; he'll go to the Damanhor police!"

"Tell me, Gaafar, would you go to the police to ask about a brown valise containing ten thousand pounds in counterfeit currency?"

Gaafar pondered the question for a moment and then burst into a fit of uncontrolled laughter.

"You have nerves of steel, Mister Alfandari," he said in admiration, when he finally regained his breath. "The police could have opened the suitcase and asked



questions, and they would soon have found out that the money is forged!"

"The money is real! It's not counterfeit. It's my money – clean!"

"Your money?"

"I have a withdrawal receipt."

"Clean money, not forged?"

"Clean, honest money!"

"Ayoooo!" shrieked Gaafar. "You are a genius, Mister Leon! Ayoooo! Nazim raised the five thousand from the El Kanawi gang! They will be shoving hot Shata peppers up his arse for sure!"

"This is your cut," said Leon, handing Gaafar a roll of one-pound bills.

"I can't take it, Mister Alfandari. It's your own money!"

"This is Nazim's money, and ten percent is your cut. You earned it."

"I feel it is farewell money, Mister Leon."

"As you said, Gaafar, they will be looking for me!"

Gaafar was right. Within a couple of days all of Alexandria had heard about the sting, and Nazim Shoukri, together with Abdulla el Kanawi, started looking for Leon Alfandari.

"Let them look," thought Leon, standing on board the *Esperia* as it plowed its way to Naples. It was midnight, and the *Esperia* was passing by Alexandria's eastern harbor lighthouse on its way to the open sea. For the first time in his life, Leon Alfandari was leaving the shores of his native land. Leaving his beloved city, never to return.

The skyline of Alexandria melted into the darkness as the *Esperia* blew its horn, drowning out the splash of the prayer beads as they hit the water.

## CALLIGRAPHY AND PICKLES

Gaston Levy was very meticulous with his attire. Clad in double-breasted pinstripe suits, matching silk neckties, and wide-brimmed Borsalino hats, he cut the figure of a Sicilian gangster on vacation. In Alexandria, French ambassadors and Italian consuls, Turkish pashas and officers in the service of their majesties Farouk and George, all seemed to be on vacation.

Gaston Levy was also very meticulous with his footwear. Two-toned shoes, brown and white to match his suit, with scores of tiny perforations, gave him the stance of a professional tango dancer. Needless to say, Gaston Levy was also very meticulous with his moustache. The thin stubble hedge fencing his upper lip grew in a row so straight, it seemed to have been traced on an architect's drawing board.

Gaston Levy was indeed a very meticulous man. He

had to be. Gaston Levy was the most famous calligraphy artist in Alexandria. His impeccable handwriting ran along straight, invisible lines, with unwavering, uniform characters. One would be tempted to believe it the product of a mechanical printing press and not of a human hand. In his small office on Fuad Street, he designed fancy matrimonial contracts for society weddings, special commercial documents for the city's magnates, and elaborate diplomatic epistles commissioned by foreign ambassadors. Rumor had it that he even embellished courting letters to the lady-love of His Majesty, King Farouk, but those are the sort of matters that are best served by discretion.

Gaston Levy could write Latin, Greek, Gothic, and Hebrew, but he owed his fame to his command of the ornate Arabic script, for which he had a special affinity.

He was literate in French, English, and Arabic, was well versed in the Koran, smoked a water-pipe, and was an aficionado of Mohamed Abed el Whahab's music. Sadly, Gaston Levy was also an incorrigible bachelor.

In the courtyard of the Eliahu Hanavi Synagogue on Nebbi Daniel Street, eligible young ladies, spurred by the community's matchmakers, would try in vain to gain the attention of the most prized "catch" in Alexandria. Gaston Levy's fussy character was their stumbling block. Giselle Cherub was too short and Jeanette Agiyon too tall; Victorine Shoshan looked melancholic, while Matilde Ateya laughed too much.

Apart from promoting his trade, Gaston Levy's meticulousness was helpful only in the preparation of salted-beef Bastarma. Indeed only a compulsive T-crossing pedant would go to the trouble of preparing Bastarma at home, when scores of the sausages hung in the doorway of every grocery. For fairness' sake, it must be said that any connoisseur with a discriminating palette would agree that homemade Bastarma is worth the trouble.

Gaston Levy prepared Bastarma only from the best cuts of lean beef, and in his characteristic, stringent way, shaped it into a perfect cylinder – salting, drying, and coating the meat with his special recipe of garlic, fenugreek, salt, and spices. Once it was done, he hung the Bastarma for maturing by the ventilation aperture close to the ceiling of his office. Gaston scrupulously calculated the position of the vent in relation to the door and the window on the opposite wall, checked the circulation of air in the room, the lifts and drafts, and concluded that the spot offering optimal drying conditions stood directly above his desk! That was where the Bastarma hung, slowly rotating as though animated by some benign spirit. Bent over his desk, Gaston Levy would be adorning sheets of parchment or papyrus, while the Bastarma pendulum swung gently

over his head. Neighbourhood backbiters spread the rumour that Gaston Levy, being a bachelor, hung his penis in his office, as he had no use for it at home!

As fate would have it, the stories and anecdotes about the strict calligraphy artist and the Bastarma pendulum enchanted Aziza, sister of Eyno the grocer. Gaston Levy's impeccable suits, his steady gait, and his princely manners only added to her fascination.

Under all sorts of pretexts, she entered Gaston's office, first showing interest in his Bastarma recipe, then volunteering her own recipe for pickled aubergines. Soon enough, Gaston was caught in the web Aziza wove around him, developing more than a liking for the grocer's sister. Afloat upon the sea of his emotions, Gaston Levy pickled carrots in brine, marinated lemons with garlic, soured vine leaves, and preserved spicy cucumbers, all according to Aziza's recipes. She would taste and click her tongue, he would take a bite and close his eyes, and Eyno would smolder at his sister's promiscuous behavior.

Like any caring brother would do, Eyno tried talking sense to his sister, declaring that she was a disgrace and was jeopardizing her chastity. When her unescorted visits to the calligrapher's office did not stop, he promised to wring her neck and shave her head. Eyno was worried well beyond his sister's good manners or reputation. Since Aziza was the magnet that attracted most of his clientele, Eyno was mostly worried about the wellbeing of his grocery store. Young men came in to feast their eyes upon Aziza's magnificent figure; older folk enjoyed her sharp tongue and quick retorts; and women would flock around her for counsel in everyday matters or a recipe for a special occasion. Eventually, Eyno had to make the ultimate threat and take the triple oath: He would shave his moustache if she ever met Gaston Levy again! Anyone else would probably have given in to such an ultimatum, but not Aziza.

To make a long story short, she married the calligraphy artist, not before Gaston Levy converted to Islam and traded his pinstriped suits for tailored Ghalabeya gowns. He donned a white head-cap in lieu of his Borsalino and let his moustache grow to street-broom proportions, waxing the tips to look like the horns on a bull's head. He abandoned the calligraphic arts, and she, her brother's grocery; and together they opened a delicatessen specializing in oriental gourmet cuisine.

From his two-toned perforated shoes Gaston Levy refused to part.

*Our thanks to Nessim Zohar for allowing us to reproduce photographs of Alexandria from his private collection.*



A falafel kiosk.