

Mountolive

A novel by

Lawrence Durrell

Author of

Justine

and

Balthazar



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JUSTINE! and BALTHAZAR

JUSTINE

"This is the best work of fiction I have read in some years . . . Demands comparison with the very best novels of our century . . . Mr. Durrell has become a truly important writer."

—*The New York Times Book Review*

"Here is a remarkable novel: deeper in thought, more intricate in design, more distinguished in style than most novels . . . It is altogether worth our delighted and admiring attention."

—*New York Herald Tribune Book Review*

"Durrell makes Alexandria seem a glitteringly sophisticated, dazzlingly beautiful, and suffocatingly evil place . . . A brilliant novel."

—*Newsweek*

"We have finally discovered a man who can write . . . Worthy of a Nobel Prize."

—*Fort Lauderdale News*

BALTHAZAR

"BALTHAZAR, like *Justine*, is written in a hauntingly sensual style. Over all, like a mirage, hangs the image of Alexandria, where 'flocks of spring pigeons glittered like confetti as they turned their wings in the light.' Like confetti glitter Author Durrell's more memorable lines."

—*Time*

"A pleasure to read . . . gives constant evidence of an alert and articulate mind at work. The author writes with poetry and precision."

—*Saturday Review*

"Among living writers there are few to equal and none to surpass Lawrence Durrell in evoking the living mystery of a specific place."

—DR. WALTER ALLEN, *celebrated international authority on the novel*

"Lawrence Durrell is moving up, onto the highest levels of the novelist's art."

—*The Nation*

"Among the exceptional novels of recent years."

—*New York Herald Tribune Book Review*

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by

LAWRENCE
DURRELL

NEW YORK

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1959

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by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.**

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HASTINGS BRANCH

A
CLAUDE

ἀγαθου διάμονος

NOTE

All the characters and situations described in this book (a sibling to JUSTINE and BALTHAZAR and the third volume of a quartet) are purely imaginary. I have exercised a novelist's right in taking a few necessary liberties with modern Middle Eastern history and the staff-structure of the Diplomatic Service. I have also improved the beauty of Trafalgar Square by adding a few elms to soften its austerity. Honi soit qui mal y pense.

The dream dissipated, were one to recover one's common-sense mood, the thing would be of but mediocre import—'tis the story of mental wrong-doing. Everyone knows very well and it offends no one. But alas! one sometimes carries the thing a little further. What, one dares wonder, what would not be the idea's realization if its mere abstract shape thus exalted has just so profoundly moved one? The accursed reverie is vivified and its existence is a crime.

Justine

D. A. F. DE SADE

MOUNTOLIVE

As a junior of exceptional promise, he had been sent to Egypt for a year in order to improve his Arabic and found himself attached to the High Commission as a sort of scribe to await his first diplomatic posting; but he was already conducting himself as a young secretary of legation, fully aware of the responsibilities of future office. Only somehow today it was rather more difficult than usual to be reserved, so exciting had the fish drive become.

He had in fact quite forgotten about his once-crisp tennis flannels and college blazer and the fact that the wash of bilge rising through the floor boards had toe-capped his white plimsolls with a black stain. In Egypt one seemed to forget oneself continually like this. He blessed the chance letter of introduction which had brought him to the Hosnani lands, to the rambling old-fashioned house built upon a network of lakes and embankments near Alexandria. Yes.

The punt which now carried him, thrust by slow thrust across the turbid water, was turning slowly eastward to take up its position in the great semicircle of boats which was being gradually closed in upon a target area marked out by the black reed spines of fish pans. And as they closed in, stroke by stroke, the Egyptian night fell—the sudden reduction of all objects to bas-reliefs upon a screen of gold and violet. The land had become dense as tapestry in the lilac afterglow, quivering here and there with water mirages from the rising damps, expanding and contracting horizons, until one thought of the world as being mirrored in a soap bubble trembling on the edge of disappearance. Voices, too, across the water sounded now loud, now soft and clear. His own cough fled across the lake in sudden wing beats. Dusk, yet it was still hot, his shirt stuck to his back. The

spokes of darkness which reached out to them only outlined the shapes of the reed-fringed islands, which punctuated the water like great pincushions, like paws, like hassocks.

Slowly, at the pace of prayer or meditation, the great arc of boats was forming and closing in, but with the land and the water liquefying at this rate he kept having the illusion that they were traveling across the sky rather than across the alluvial waters of Mareotis. And out of sight he could hear the splatter of geese, and in one corner water and sky split apart as a flight rose, trailing its webs across the estuary like seaplanes, honking crassly. Mountolive sighed and stared down into the brown water, chin on his hands. He was unused to feeling so happy. Youth is the age of despairs.

Behind him he could hear the hare-lipped younger brother Narouz grunting at every thrust of the pole while the lurch of the boat echoed in his loins. The mud, thick as molasses, dripped back into the water with a slow *flob flob*, and the pole sucked lusciously. It was very beautiful, but it all stank so: yet to his surprise he found he rather enjoyed the rotting smells of the estuary. Drafts of wind from the far sea line ebbed around them from time to time, refreshing the mind. Choirs of gnats whizzed up there like silver rain in the eye of the dying sun. The cobweb of changing light fired his mind. "Narouz," he said, "I am so happy," as he listened to his own unharried heartbeats. The youth gave his shy hissing laugh and said, "Good, good," ducking his head. "But this is nothing. Wait. We are closing in." Mountolive smiled. "Egypt," he said to himself as one might repeat the name of a woman. "Egypt."

"Over there," said Narouz in his hoarse, melodious voice, "the ducks are not *rusés*, do you know?" (His English was imperfect and stilted.) "For the poaching of them, it is easy (you say 'poaching' don't you?) You dive under them and take them by the legs. Easier than shooting, eh? If you wish, tomorrow we will go." He grunted again at the pole and sighed.

"What about snakes?" said Mountolive. He had seen several large ones swimming about that afternoon.

Narouz squared his stout shoulders and chuckled. "No snakes," he said and laughed once more.

Mountolive turned sideways to rest his cheek on the wood of the prow. Out of the corner of his eye he could see his companion, standing up as he poled, and study the hairy arms and hands, the sturdy braced legs. "Shall I take a turn?" he asked in Arabic. He had already noticed how much pleasure it gave his hosts when he spoke to them in their native tongue. Their answers, smilingly given, were a sort of embrace. "Shall I?"

"Of course not," said Narouz, smiling his ugly smile which was only redeemed by magnificent eyes and a deep voice. Sweat dripped down from the curly black hair with its widow's peak. And then lest his refusal might seem impolite, he added, "The drive will start with darkness. I know what to do; and you must look and see the fish." The two little pink frills of flesh which edged his unbasted lip were wet with spittle. He winked lovingly at the English youth.

The darkness was racing toward them now and the light expiring. Narouz suddenly cried, "Now is the moment. Look there." He clapped his hands loudly and shouted across the water, startling his companion who followed his pointed finger with raised head. "What?" the dull report of a gun from the furthestest boat shook the air and suddenly the sky line was sliced in half by a new flight, rising more slowly and dividing earth from air in a pink traveling wound; like the heart of a pomegranate staring through its skin. Then, turning from pink to scarlet, flushed back into white and fell to the lake level like a shower of snow to melt as it touched the water—"Flamingo," they both cried and laughed, and the darkness snapped upon them, extinguishing the visible world.

For a long moment now they rested, breathing deeply, to let their eyes grow accustomed to it. Voices and laughter from the distant boats floating across their path. Someone cried, "Ya

Narouz," and again, "Ya Narouz." He only grunted. And now there came the short syncopated tapping of a finger drum, music whose rhythms copied themselves instantly in Mountolive's mind so that he felt his own fingers begin to tap upon the boards. The lake was floorless now, the yellow mud had vanished—the soft cracked mud of prehistoric lake faults, or the bituminous mud which the Nile drove down before it on its course to the sea. All the darkness still smelled of it. "Ya Narouz," came the cry again, and Mountolive recognized the voice of Nessim the elder brother borne upon a sea breath as it spaced out the words. "Time . . . to . . . light . . . up." Narouz yelped an answer and grunted with satisfaction as he fumbled for matches. "Now you'll see," he said with pride.

The circle of boats had narrowed now to encompass the pans and in the hot dusk matches began to spark, while soon the carbide lamps attached to the prows blossomed into trembling yellow flowers, wobbling up into definition, enabling those who were out of line to correct their trim. Narouz bent over his guest with an apology and groped at the prow. Mountolive smelled the sweat of his strong body as he bent down to test the rubber tube and shake the old Bakelite box of the lamp, full of rock carbide. Then he turned a key, struck a match, and for a moment the dense fumes engulfed them both where they sat, breath held, only to clear swiftly while beneath them also flowered, like some immense colored crystal, a semicircle of lake water, candent and faithful as a magic lantern to the startled images of fish scattering and reforming with movements of surprise, curiosity, perhaps even pleasure. Narouz expelled his breath sharply and retired to his place. "Look down," he urged, and added, "But keep your head well down." And as Mountolive, who did not understand this last piece of advice, turned to question him, he said, "Put a coat around your head. The kingfishers go mad with the fish and they are not night-sighted. Last time I had my cheek cut open; and Sobhi lost an eye. Face forward and down."

Mountolive did as he was bidden and lay there floating over

the nervous pool of lamplight whose floor was now peerless crystal not mud and alive with water tortoises and frogs and sliding fish—a whole population disturbed by this intrusion from the overworld. The punt lurched again and moved while the cold bilge came up around his toes. Out of the corner of his eye he could see that now the great half circle of light, the chain of blossoms, was closing more rapidly; and as if to give the boats orientation and measure, there arose a drumming and singing, subdued and melancholy, yet authoritative. He felt the tug of the turning boat echoed again in his backbone. His sensations recalled nothing he had ever known, were completely original.

The water had become dense now, and thick; like an oatmeal soup that is slowly stirred into thickness over a slow fire. But when he looked more closely he saw that the illusion was caused not by the water but by the multiplication of the fish themselves. They had begun to swarm, darting in schools, excited by the very consciousness of their own numbers, yet all sliding and skirmishing one way. The cordon, too, had tightened like a noose and only twenty feet now separated them from the next boat, the next pool of waxen light. The boatmen had begun to utter hoarse cries and pound the waters around them, themselves excited by the premonition of those fishy swarms which crowded the soft lake bottom, growing more and more excited as the shallows began and they recognized themselves trapped in the shining circle. There was something like delirium in their swarming and circling now. Vague shadows of men began to unwind hand nets in the boats and the shouting thickened. Mountolive felt his blood beating faster with excitement. "In a moment," cried Narouz. "Lie still."

The waters thickened to glue and silver bodies began to leap into the darkness only to fall back, glittering like coinage, into the shallows. The circles of light touched, overlapped, and the whole ceinture was complete, and from all around it there came the smash and crash of dark bodies leaping into the shallows,

furling out the long hand nets which were joined end to end and whose dark loops were already bulging like Christmas stockings with the squirming bodies of fish. The leapers had taken fright too and their panic-stricken leaps ripped up the whole surface of the pan, flashing back cold water upon the stuttering lamps, falling into the boats, a shuddering harvest of cold scales and drumming tails. Their exciting death struggles were as contagious as the drumming had been. Laughter shook the air as the nets closed. Mountolive could see Arabs with their long white robes tucked up to the waist pressing forward with steadying hands held to the dark prows beside them, pushing their linked nets slowly forward. The light gleamed upon their dark thighs. The darkness was full of their barbaric blitheness.

And now came another unexpected phenomenon—for the sky itself began to thicken above them as the water had below. The darkness was suddenly swollen with unidentifiable shapes for the jumpers had alerted the sleepers from the shores of the lakes, and with shrill incoherent cries the new visitants from the sedge-lined outer estuary joined in the hunt—hundreds of pelican, flamingo, crane and kingfisher—coming in on irregular trajectories to careen and swoop and snap at the jumping fish. The waters and the air alike seethed with life as the fishermen aligned their nets and began to scoop the swarming catch into the boats, or turned out their nets to let the rippling cascades of silver pour over the gunwales until the helmsmen were sitting ankle-deep in the squirming bodies. There would be enough and to spare for men and birds, and while the larger waders of the lake folded and unfolded awkward wings like old-fashioned painted parasols, or hovered in ungainly parcels above the snapping, leaping water, the kingfishers and herring gulls came in from every direction at the speed of thunderbolts, half mad with greed and excitement, flying on suicidal courses, some to break their necks outright upon the decks of the boats, some to flash beak forward into the dark body of a fisherman to split open a cheek or a thigh in their terrifying cupidity. The splash