The Serpent

He was bright of face and smiling of mouth, light in movement and eloquent of tongue. Hardly would he sit with someone—or someone sit with him—without that person feeling the pulse of a heart burning with zeal for reform, a spirit leaping toward lofty ideals, and a mind that saw around it nothing but evil, refusing to rest or be at peace until that evil was destroyed and every trace of it effaced, and in its place rose that pure and universal good embracing every human being and every thing, endowing all it touched with a quiet, graceful beauty—yet a beauty strong and insistent, like sunlight, which not only adorns what it illumines but gives it life, fertility, strength, and vigor.

His passion for reform, his yearning for good, his call for justice often carried him beyond himself, pushing him past ordinary composure into a kind of vehemence unfamiliar to Egyptians in those days. He could not stay still wherever he was—be it in a house, a club, a café, or an office. He would spring from his seat, unable to remain in one place as he spoke to those around him, pacing as a preacher does. His hands would fly in gestures that terrified his companions for the safety of whatever lay nearby. Then the signs of anger would appear on his face—bright features darkening, smiles vanishing into scowls, sparks leaping from his agitated eyes, and a tremendous voice bursting forth, booming with phrases that followed one another like crashing waves or a tempest's roar. His friends would first be struck with astonishment, which soon turned to a continuous, wordless stupor—they knew not whether their silence expressed admiration and approval, or censure and dismay, or simply wariness and fear.

And they were right to be cautious and afraid. For Egypt in those days was not as she has been since she attained independence, freedom, constitution, and parliament. Matters in those years stumbled; scarcely would they rise before they fell again, scarcely advance before they halted. An alien occupation spread its visible and hidden power through every public and private sphere, while a native authority, deeply suspicious and full of precautions, swayed between the citizens once and the occupiers again—seeking sometimes to please both, and ending only by earning the wrath of both.

All this corrupted the Egyptian atmosphere and made it suffocating, exhausting the strength of men, for the people themselves were the ground of struggle between those two powers. They could not satisfy one without fearing the other. Each power had its own eyes and spies scattered through clubs, cafés, offices, even private gatherings, noting what people said, twisting it as they pleased, and sending it upward—to the foreign rulers or the native ones. The effects were plain enough in the favor or anger shown by this or that authority. Thinkers and men of opinion thus lived in continual anxiety, as if walking upon thorns. It was no wonder that our friend, when seized by one of his reforming fits, stirred in the hearts of his companions some tremor of caution and fear—for these fits often took him, and when they did, he blazed forth into a fury that would devour everything in sight.

He had lately returned from Europe, where he had spent several years, completing his studies and witnessing that free and aspiring life which was unbound by the social conventions that shackled Egyptian life, nor chained by the political authority that fettered Egyptian existence as well. There he saw a broad, easy life that had recognized human dignity and the individual's right to do and refrain, to see and to say, as he wished, provided he harmed no one in word or deed. He had shared that life, delighted in its ease and tolerance, and—like other Egyptians living in Europe—he could hardly see or hear anything without comparing it to its counterpart in Egypt. These comparisons, naturally, provoked and irritated him, for they forced him to confess inwardly that Europe possessed both material and intellectual progress, that its peoples enjoyed liberty of speech and action, and that Egypt was far from such advancement, deprived of such liberty altogether.

So he returned home with a heart blazing with indignation and a jealous pride that would not let him rest, becoming a vivid, living embodiment of discontent with everything, impatience with everything, and a fierce determination to change everything. The youth welcomed him on his return, admiring him—indeed, captivated by him. But their ardor soon cooled, and one by one they drifted away—some out of fear, others out of weakness, others still out of sheer weariness. It must be admitted that his conversations, for all their passion and intensity, were sometimes obscure, beyond the grasp of average minds, and at other times repetitive, until listeners grew weary of hearing the same fiery words.

In all likelihood, our friend had returned from Europe without truly probing its essence. The appearances had deceived him, the surface dazzled him, and the charm of European civilization seduced him. In his admiration and enchantment he found a kind of distinction that flattered his pride, and he surrendered himself to it completely. What had to happen, happened: authority noticed him, grew wary, and laid for him a subtle trap. He tried to stand firm and slip through it, but failed, and was forced to turn back, returning once more to that Europe that had bewitched his heart and soul with its splendor.

He had barely settled there when the Great War broke out. He remained through it as long as fate allowed, and it seems he profited greatly from this second stay. When he came back to Egypt after the Revolution, he found before him what he had never expected to see. There was no great change in material civilization, nor notable development in intellectual life—but there was a freedom unknown before: a freedom that paid no heed to foreign machinations or native caution, to spies or censors, to martial law or the English emergency courts that had lingered years after the war, nor to those violent clashes that erupted now and then between Egyptian youth and British soldiers. It was a freedom that pressed forward unflinchingly, nothing checking or turning it back; obstacles only strengthened and drove it on.

He saw Egyptians now speak of everything without fear or reserve, denouncing what he once denounced: they were dissatisfied with the foreign occupation, discontented with their political system, uneasy with their social life, rebelling against it gently at times, violently at others. They were eager for reform, striving toward ideals. When they met, their talk was of truth, justice, liberty, independence, and progress—both material and intellectual.

He beheld all this and stood perplexed—uncertain whether to approve or disapprove. Had he followed his first nature, he would have rejoiced at what he saw and joined his compatriots in earnest pursuit of reform, of progress, of freedom, of independence. But his years in Europe during the war, and the hardships he had endured there, had taught him flexibility, subtlety, the art of avoidance—how to elude harm when danger loomed and seize advantage when fortune smiled. Thus he returned a changed man, one reborn by the war. Before it, he had been ahead of his countrymen in ambition and reform; after it, he lagged behind, scarcely sharing their zeal.

From that time on he chose a middle course. He could not deny his past, yet he could not resist the sweeping current of Egyptian passion for bold change. Still, he shrank from joining their cries for liberty, their pursuit of independence, their yearning to match or resist Europe. Tired from Europe's hardships, craving rest and comfort, he wished to recover the time he had lost, to regain what he had missed, and to secure for himself the tangible and lasting benefits that had eluded him in his days of fiery reform.

He found Egypt divided—some moderate, others extreme—and wished to be neither. He would not be counted backward with the moderates, nor struggle and suffer with the radicals. And so he shaped

for himself this middle way: he acknowledged the Revolution, praised it, yet took no part in it. He gathered friends among both moderates and extremists, insisting that friendship must rise above the ailments of politics. For a truly free man, he said, does not let politics distract him from the noble demands of loyalty, affection, and faithful companionship.

Thus you would see him at the meetings of the moderates, listening and answering little; and you would see him also at the gatherings of the radicals, listening and agreeing just enough. He attended both their celebrations—theirs and theirs—since he had friends among both. Yet when matters grew grave and the storm bared its teeth, he vanished. They would seek him then and find no trace; inquire after him, and none could say where he had gone. But once the tempest passed, the hearts stilled and the world was calm again, there he was once more among them, as ever—bright of face, smiling of mouth, gentle of word, sweet of speech.

He achieved what few Egyptians achieved: he pleased both the conservatives and the reformers, each in their own way. But the times turned, and Egypt's trials came one after another. In such moments, when a nation is tested in its hopes, its liberties at home and abroad, one would expect a moderate to grow bold, a conservative to stand firm—if indeed his moderation and conservatism were sincere, unmoved by gain or fear.

Yet our friend did not grow bold when others did, nor renew himself when even the conservatives renewed. He remained, as always, bright of face, smiling of mouth, light of step, pleasant of speech, sweet of talk.

The conservatives, stubborn in their conservatism, may have sensed in him a leaning toward them, a desire to bind his fortunes with theirs—but only on the condition that his bonds of friendship with the radicals not be severed. For it is, after all, an established truth that friendship must rise above differences of opinion in politics and social order. The conservatives received him warmly, delighted by his closeness and connection; the radicals overlooked him, for he was loyal, and his loyalty rose above the maladies of politics.

Then came a time when conservatism itself became a kind of patriotism, a display of zeal for the nation's honor and interests. It grew fashionable to call oneself a conservative and denounce the radicals. So our friend declared himself a conservative too—recalling the nation's glory, cherishing its traditions, condemning rebellion against established order and inherited custom. Yet at the same time, he did not neglect his radical friends: he showed them courtesy when courtesy was fitting, compassion when compassion was due, and by that ensured their indulgence for his excess of caution.

In all this his affairs went as smoothly as he could wish. The conservatives supported him when power fell into their hands; the radicals tolerated him when it passed to theirs. The public at large, high and low alike, came to regard him as a man above parties, aloof from their quarrels, though inclined by temperament toward moderation and prudence.

I said to my companion: "Can you tell me what you wish me to learn from this story that never ends?"

He replied: "I wish only to point out something very simple: that those who seek safety, success, and advantage, and wish to avoid harm to themselves, their hopes, and their work—would do well to follow this man's example."

I said to him: “Not everyone can become a serpent—and it is no blessing for Egypt that her serpents should multiply.”

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
al-Balāgh, 21 January 1945