

From Paris: Knowledge and Wealth

Here and there in Egypt, there are many rich men — yet most of them live in greater misery than the destitute poor. They do not understand wealth; they neither value it nor grasp what bonds it ought to create between them and their fellow citizens. All they draw from their riches is the ability to eat more than they need and to indulge in pleasures that reach no deeper than the senses — never touching the heart or the mind. Their wealth is confined to their bodies; and when it touches their souls at all, it touches only vanity and arrogance, pride and self-importance — never intelligence, compassion, or generosity.

Egypt abounds in rich men, yet they are poorer in spirit than the needy. Their wealth benefits neither themselves in life nor others after their death. They do not own their riches — they merely carry them, like beasts of burden, from one generation to the next. They inherit them from their fathers only to pass them on to their sons, crossing with them the river of life. And how often this wealth becomes a weight that drags them down into ruin, leaving their heirs nothing but misery and misfortune.

In truth, Egypt has many rich men — but they are beggars at heart.

Europe, too, has its wealthy; but they are far from poverty, for they understand wealth and know how to use it — wisely, fruitfully — for their own lives and for the lives of their nations, their cities, and their families. They truly enjoy their riches, deriving from them not only the pleasures of the body, but also those of the heart and of the mind. They draw from wealth the true joy of life — and the immortality of a good name after death. They give and they receive; they are neither parasites upon their people, nor are their people a burden upon them.

They understand that wealth is a tool of shared benefit, a means by which all may partake of prosperity according to their capacity. They use money not only to buy food, clothing, or comfort — but also to purchase love, respect, and gratitude; to earn a good reputation both in life and beyond it. They are not beasts of burden carrying wealth from one age to another, but human beings who invest it, enrich others, and are enriched in turn. They are not slaves to matter — they are its masters, bending it to serve the dignity and happiness of humankind.

I read in *Le Temps* that a man has donated ten million francs to the University of Paris to build a residential quarter for its students, so they might live in comfort conducive to study. I read in *Le Temps* of a woman who left her entire fortune — nearly fifteen million francs — to the same university; and that before her death, she had already given money to several universities, enabling poor students to publish their doctoral theses, and endowing a lectureship on eighteenth-century literature and history.

Another woman, I read, gave the university a sum producing thirty-five thousand francs annually for research on radium in medicine; a man left half a million; a high school teacher left seventy-six thousand to assist students of modern history; and yet another woman gave a million to aid historians in their research.

I read, too, that theatres, music halls, and even houses of entertainment have set aside part of their income to support scientific laboratories — and that even the poor and working classes have gathered funds to help scientists establish and equip their institutes. And still, the

newspapers publish indignant editorials complaining that scientists lament the poverty of their laboratories and appeal to the public for aid — as if this generosity were not enough!

Yet this “poverty of science” in France is only relative — for both the State and society lavish immense care upon it. The proof lies in France’s scientific pre-eminence, still the envy of Europe.

Some months ago, I wrote that science, no matter how rich, is always in need — for it lives, and all living things remain in need. Scientists will always complain, and humanity will always give.

That is France.

As for Egypt — there is wealth in abundance, wealth so heavy it burdens its owners. But we cannot even speak of the poverty of science, for we can scarcely speak of science at all. Egypt does not possess knowledge; she borrows it from Europe and America, borrowing badly, and never enough to sustain her own life. When it comes to cars, jewelry, or fine clothing, money flows freely — but when it comes to the nourishment of mind and spirit, our poverty is absolute.

While Europe and America teem with flourishing sciences we have never even heard of, we shut our ears and refuse to listen — lest we be compelled to spend to acquire them. Yet let a new fashion arise in Paris or New York — a car, a dress, a trinket — and we rush to import it, sparing no expense. Outwardly, we appear among the most civilized peoples on earth; we may even dress more elegantly than the wealthy of Paris or London. But behind this glitter lies decay — or something very much like it.

What can one expect of a people who import every device of material pleasure, but turn away when science, literature, or art are mentioned? Even when knowledge exists among them, they refuse to see it. Europeans and Americans, across the seas, pursue it eagerly — while an Egyptian who wishes to know Egypt as a Frenchman knows France must seek his country in Paris, London, or Berlin — perhaps even in Athens. What a disgrace!

We have said these things before, and we shall keep saying them. Yet none will listen, save for a few disheartened idealists. Those who could act — those whose means could benefit their country — are too absorbed in vanity to care. They delight in worldly show, while the intellect starves.

We founded a university fifteen years ago — and but for God’s grace, it would already have perished. Our wealthy once took pride in supporting it when such giving was novel; but once the novelty faded, so did their generosity. They withheld their promised gifts, though the war had not impoverished Egypt as it had France.

In France, war destroyed fortunes and shattered society — yet it only deepened the nation’s love of science, strengthened its support for scholars, and, through science itself, led to victory. In Egypt, the war multiplied wealth, yet it multiplied greed and indulgence as well.

Government and individuals alike share this fault. I recall the first Nasim ministry spending nearly half a million pounds to repair official automobiles, while the university received only a thousand pounds — even as the national budget rose from twenty to forty million. The

Ministry of Awqāf once gave it five thousand pounds annually; now it offers barely eighteen hundred. Has Awqāf grown poor? Or the government itself?

And still we cry for independence, claiming equality with Europe! Yet Europeans did not win freedom through luxury, but through the passionate pursuit of knowledge.

Let us thank God for the constitution; if we have lost faith in governments and the wealthy, we may still trust the nation — embodied in Parliament — not to forgive such neglect. Let it not pardon a Ministry of Education that leaves Egypt in ignorance while the world advances.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

Paris, 11 May 1923

Published in al-Siyāsa, 22 May 1923