

## Talk of the Week

*by Dr. Taha Hussein*

The weather in Cairo was restless and unsettled this week; it would recall the departing winter and summon up a few ghosts of the cold, then glimpse the coming summer and hurry to put on a few of the first signs of high heat. The day had a very poor memory indeed, wiping winter from itself almost as soon as winter's season had passed. The night was somewhat more faithful, its memory holding a little better, and somewhat kinder to people — as though it pitied them for the day's harshness, for its forgetting of old loyalties, its disdain for yesterday and its headlong rush toward tomorrow. So the night would stir up for them a few of those calm, sweet breezes that sometimes drown so deep in stillness and lightness that they all but turn biting, as if to warn people of the danger of betraying winter's pact as the day had betrayed it, of rushing headlong into summer's pact as the day had rushed into it, of casting off their clothes too soon and growing careless of caution against those few, hidden, drowning draughts that cling to a moonbeam or to a breath of the breeze — draughts that do not always scruple to brush the unwary with the lightest touch, only to expose them to harm, and lay upon them a heavy burden of suffering.

And the people — or, more precisely, the literary folk — kept pace with the weather, as is their habit in every season and every clime. They would wilt for the daytime and quicken for the night; they grew heavy toward noon, and light again as the sun set; they discharged their business listless and inert through the forenoon, or else merely assumed the posture of men discharging business, while accomplishing nothing of it at all. But once the sun, as Labid once said, had "laid a hand into the dusk," bodies grew light, spirits quickened, lungs opened wide to the air, minds and intellects unfolded to fancies, and tongues broke loose into talk.

The literary folk's talk this week was no small or trifling matter, nor one lightly borne by those among the literati who spoke it, or by those outside literature who passed it on; for they opened the week's conversation with that gathering which had closed the week before — the one held by the society known as "Les Essayistes," intended, I will not say to revive Mukhtar's memory, but simply to mention it, no more. And the literary folk's talk of this gathering was curious indeed, for it amounted to no more than noting the event and touching upon it lightly, without

explaining it or offering any comment at all.

And is the talk of Egypt's non-literary folk these days any better than the talk of its literary folk? You may seek out vigor among the politicians, or among the men of money, or among any other class of people besides these — and if you should find it, or even some semblance of it, then you would be quite fair in blaming the literary folk for falling short, and faulting them for languor.

Yet there were two things the literary folk did not neglect when they spoke of this gathering — if indeed they spoke of it at all, or truly engaged with it, and if this account I pass on from them is not merely a faint fancy, as faint as the literary life of these days generally is:

The first of these two things is that this gathering was, in fact, an achievement of youth, and of youth alone: it was the young who conceived it, the young who issued the invitations, the young who pressed the invitation so insistently that they succeeded in compelling a group of older men and elders to respond to their call, and won from another group promises and good intentions never fated to be fulfilled or realized, while from yet another group they won neither promise nor intention, let alone fulfillment or realization.

The second thing is that this gathering produced no event in literature, brought forth nothing new to it, save one curious, valuable, and moving remark made by our friend Mustafa Abd al-Raziq. Beyond that remark, there was nothing at all — so much so that our friend Mutran could do no better than repeat to his listeners a splendid and accomplished poem, without doubt, but an old one: composed and recited once to welcome Mukhtar home in triumph, to greet his glory, and now exhumed and recited again to bid Mukhtar farewell when death claimed him for its own, so that he departed bidding farewell both to glory and to life.

And the strange thing is that this gathering was held to honor art, and to memorialize the foremost sculptor in the history of modern Egypt — the sculptor who fashioned, out of stone, works said to be so beautiful, so splendid, that they make the mute speak, stir feeling in those whose feelings never stir, and bring emotion welling up in those whose emotions never well up — and yet, for all that, he moved none of our literary men to speech (and how much they are given to speech!), stirred no feeling in them (and how easily their feelings are stirred!), brought no emotion welling up in them (and how readily their emotions well up!). The literary

folk wondered among themselves, in secret and in the open, asleep and awake, in earnest and in fancy, what could be the source of this; and the answer came: that Egypt is now asleep, taking her rest.

Then a day passed, and another day of the week, and behold, the literary folk had already forgotten their talk of Mukhtar, if indeed they had ever truly spoken of him — for another conversation had now had its doors thrown open to them, its means laid out before them: the talk of a newspaper which a judicial ruling had compelled to silence, so that its writers scattered and its staff dispersed across the land in search of God's bounty for themselves and for others, and that voice — or those voices — fell silent, the voices once heard every morning, which had opened, for politicians and literary men, for men of economics and seekers of news alike, every manner of discourse and every shade of talk. The literary folk spoke of this literary-political event, in secret and in the open, asleep and awake, in earnest and in fancy, and they wondered: why have the literary folk not spoken out on this? And the answer came: that Egypt is now asleep, taking her rest.

Then a day passed, and another, and another of the week, and behold, a celebration was held, a gathering at which people crowded into one of the theatre's stages; behold, speeches were delivered, varied in their colors, diverse in their forms; behold, a poet was honored with this vast assembly, this splendid celebration, these lengthy speeches. And behold the literary folk — God forgive me, I should say the poets among them especially — speaking of this literary event, passing along its news, interpreting it and construing it, in secret and in the open, asleep and awake, in earnest and in fancy, and then wondering aloud: why did the poets not take part in honoring the poet? And the answer came: that Egypt is now asleep, taking her rest.

Now, I confess that I did not dislike this answer, nor did it trouble me; for the love of sleep and the indulgence in repose is indeed an evil — but some evils are lighter than others. And I confess that I prefer this answer to another, hateful one, which I would rather neither hear myself nor have others hear, nor have it stand as the true picture of the matter. It was an answer that certain people whispered — people who fabricate lies against God and against their fellow men — for they would say, and would that they had never said it: that the literary folk and the educated classes had grown sluggish about mentioning Mukhtar only because mentioning Mukhtar is a thing to be feared! And they would say, and would that they had never said it: that the voices of the literary folk fell

silent about the silencing of those writers only because to touch upon either their silence or their speech is a thing to be feared! And they would say, and would that they had never said it: that poetry grew too heavy to honor al-'Aqqad, because honoring al-'Aqqad is a thing to be feared on one hand, and a thing too hard for the poets to bear on the other — for fear had settled upon one wing of poetry, and rivalry had settled upon its other wing, so that the poor creature was left crouching upon the ground, unable to soar into the sky or swim through the air.

As for myself, I did not care for the first answer, since I am a man who does not love sleep, nor does repose bring me rest. Nor did I care for the second answer, since it was wholly a lie, dictated by ill-thinking and the love of malice. And so I turned away from the literary folk's talk this week, and spoke instead to myself, and to myself alone, of a matter bearing no relation to literature, no relation to politics, no relation to anything that occupies the distinguished people of this country just now: the talk of astrologers.

Do not be surprised, and do not let astonishment seize you, for I have indeed thought of astrologers, and thought of them at length. Have not the newspapers claimed that the Sultan is hunting down astrology and astrologers in Egypt? Yet what concern is it of mine to think of astrology and astrologers, when I read in the European press that astrology is rising again in Europe after its fall, awakening after its long sleep, and recovering its high standing — in the palaces of kings and the offices of ministers, God forgive me, indeed on the very battlefields, indeed in the universities as well!

For here is a French newspaper — *Les Nouvelles Littéraires* — telling us that His Majesty George, King-Emperor, has himself taken an interest in astrology and the talk of astrologers, and refused to let his son travel to Australia on a day the astrologers feared would bring him harm — a day on which, as it happened, a French aircraft carrying the Governor-General of French Indochina caught fire and burned. The same newspaper tells us that the great Italian leader concerns himself with astrology and astrologers just as he concerns himself with politics and politicians. It tells us, too, that the Germans had attached astrologers to their high command during the War, and that the word of these astrologers carried weight, and that the astrologers' promises to the German commanders proved truer than the astrologers' dire warnings once given to al-Mu'tasim, son of al-Rashid. The same newspaper tells us that the Germans established a chair of astrology at the University of

Berlin in the year 1918.

And then the very same newspaper goes on to reproach France for not attending to astrology and astrologers with the same care shown by the English, the Italians, and the Germans! How, then, would this newspaper react if it learned that Egyptians count astrology a sin, and regard astrologers as no better than a band of vagrants? Might we not be permitted to point out to the Sultan that there is no need for so great a distance to stand between us and the Europeans — that we should make war upon astrology and turn away from it, just when the Europeans are championing it and flocking to embrace it? Would it not be a fine thing for every Cabinet to have its own astrologer? Indeed, what business is it of ours, the Cabinets and their astrologers! Do we not see that talking to oneself about astrology and astrologers is a better occupation than talking to oneself about literature and literary men?