

The Egyptian Stranger in Egypt!

Al-Risala, 2 April 1934

It is Mukhtar. For in his life he was a mirror, true with the fullest truth, to the soul of an Egypt eternal, beyond all bound or reckoning. In that mirror you could find true images of the soul of ancient Egypt, and of the soul of Islamic Egypt, and of the soul of this Egypt which this generation is shaping now, and of Egypt's hopes and her highest ideals as time advances and advances still, and other generations inherit the soil of the homeland from these generations now astir upon it.

Mukhtar was this clear, burnished mirror in which the life of Egypt was reflected across all her differing ages and the circumstances surrounding her, and in this regard he was, of all Egypt's sons, the most closely bound to her, the nearest to her, the truest representation of her. And yet, for all that, he was a stranger in Egypt during these last weeks, which closed on Tuesday evening when Mukhtar's life closed with them. He arrived from Europe, and the newspapers scarcely spoke of his arrival; scarcely any but a handful of his friends hastened to meet him. He remained in Egypt, sick and worn, pain and illness pressing upon him, and scarcely any of the Egyptians who had once admired him, rallied to him, cheered his name, taken pride in his glory, and held their heads high for his works, remembered him — save a countable few; perhaps, if you counted them, they would not reach twenty; I fear they might not reach even that small a number. Then his illness grew severe and drove him to the hospital, and the newspapers scarcely spoke of that either, save in the briefest passing mention. Mukhtar's friends hastened to the hospital, asking after their friend, wishing to see him, but illness stood between them and that meeting. They were told that a veil had now been cast between them and this friend, even though life still lingered, faltering, in his wasted body. Then the people awoke on Wednesday to find Mukhtar's obituary filling Cairo, falling upon the hearts of its people with the force of a sharp pain and a searing grief. Then evening came on that same Wednesday, and a group of select Egyptians, with a few foreigners, gathered at the Cairo station to receive Mukhtar's body, and walked with it to the mosque. Then they parted, and Mukhtar went on to his final resting place, with those around him — count them however you like — never reaching even half a hundred. Then Mukhtar reached his grave; then Mukhtar descended into that grave, and these friends stood by, possessed by a deep, brooding silence broken only by that grating,

gentle-seeming sound — the sound of spades and mattocks leveling the earth above him, severing what bonds still remained between him and life — and broken, too, by that call which repeated now and again, harsh though it strove to seem gentle, demanding the water needed to settle this grave, to raise this barrier between its occupant and life — and broken, too, by that murmuring babble which assaulted the ears, when by right it should have been sweet, tender music, to capture wounded hearts, to calm troubled souls, to bring the grieving and the despairing back to what they owed of submission to God's decree and contentment with God's judgment. It was, instead, the murmuring babble of those reciters who twist their tongues around the Book — though God himself has disdained that people should twist their tongues around His Book, for it is a Book clear and upright, in which there is no crookedness, no distortion, but only guidance for minds and healing for what lies within the breast. Then every voice fell silent, and these friends dispersed, carrying in their hearts whatever love and yearning, whatever sorrow and anguish they carried, bearing all of this with them to plunge back into this life that awaited them, a few short steps from where the dead lie at rest.

And so Mukhtar's story ended with the ending of that Wednesday's day, and so the curtain of death fell upon Mukhtar's life at the very hour the darkness of night fell upon the life of the living. And how often do people's stories end, every day — indeed every hour, indeed every moment! And how often does the curtain of death fall, whether the sun is rising or setting, and we feel nothing of it, and pay it no heed — because those whom death snatches away, or reaps, at any given moment, are mostly unknown folk, whom circumstance never singled out, nor did they single out themselves; so they pass on without anyone sensing it, just as they once arrived without anyone sensing it either. But Mukhtar was truly a stranger at the end of his life, and truly a stranger at the very onset of his death — and what wonder is there in that? He had chosen a life of exile for years past, visiting his homeland only fleetingly, and had grown used to his countrymen's coldness. I am quite certain this wounded him, but he was too proud, in his own eyes, ever to complain or show his pain. We have heard that he bore his illness bravely, met it bravely, that no anguish, no terror, ever overtook him. And had he lived to see, after his death, how his countrymen bid him farewell, it would not have affected him any more deeply than his countrymen's coldness had already affected him while he lived. Perhaps he grieved over it, deep in the depths of his exceptional heart, and then showed nothing at all of his

grief, just as he had done throughout his life — while it is we who ought to feel the keenest pain, to grieve the deepest grief, to feel no small measure of anguish, regret, and disappointment, seeing this filial ingratitude, and reckoning its weight upon the soul of our dear, departed friend. For we used to say, and still say, that it was Mukhtar who restored to Egypt some portion of her share in artistic glory; we used to say, and still say, that Mukhtar enabled Egypt to express herself, and what she found of pain and hope, in a new tongue she had never before been able to command — the tongue of art. We used to say, and still say, that Mukhtar gave Egypt voice in this language which all people understand, the language of beauty, the language of art, after she had been able to speak only in that other language understood only by one particular generation of people — the language of speech. We used to say, and still say, that Mukhtar revived in Egypt a custom long settled, long passed over for centuries upon centuries — the custom of art. We used to say, and still say, that Mukhtar drew the eyes of Europeans to Egypt, furnishing them proof that her demand for independence was no idle, empty thing, but rather the fruit of a new life, a new vitality — and Mukhtar drew the Europeans' attention to this at the most fitting moment of all, in the very hour of political revolution. We used to say, and still say, that Mukhtar, new as he was to art, was the very first of Egyptians to win Europe's admiration: did he not exhibit his works in Paris? Did the art press not speak of Mukhtar before the literary press ever spoke of our writers and our poets? Did Mukhtar's works not find their place in the museums of Paris before the works of our writers and poets ever found their place upon her library shelves? We used to say all of this, and we used to say, and still say, that Mukhtar restored to Egyptians no small measure of confidence in themselves, of hope for their future, of assurance in their capacity for a distinguished and elevated life. We used to say this, and more than this — and yet, for all that, Mukhtar spent the end of his life an exile, or as good as one. Mukhtar spent his final days in Egypt forgotten, or as good as forgotten, and Mukhtar's funeral procession crossed the city of Cairo, attended only by a handful of the elect — nothing more!! God forgive us — indeed, Mukhtar's funeral passed before the very statue he had fashioned with his own two hands, exactly as it might have passed before anything at all; nothing in that statue showed any sign of grief, any sign of mourning, any sign of gratitude or acknowledgment of his gift. And Mukhtar's funeral crossed the city of Cairo while the Egyptian government remained ignorant of it, or very nearly so; no Minister of Science and Art walked in Mukhtar's funeral procession, nor stood at Mukhtar's grave. No one delivered, at

Mukhtar's grave, a word of farewell; it was silence alone that escorted him, silence alone that the earth used to cover him over, silence alone that bid him farewell as his friends scattered from around him. Had Mukhtar died in some country other than Egypt, his death would have been another matter entirely. Had Mukhtar been French, or English, or Italian, and rendered to his country what he rendered to Egypt, the state would have done something quite other than neglect and indifference. His funeral, then, would have been an official one, paid for by the state, attended on foot by men of state, eulogized by the great men of state — but Mukhtar was born in Egypt, worked in Egypt, and died in Egypt, and so he had to content himself with whatever was granted him on that Wednesday: a farewell from those who had been his friends and those who had loved him. Nothing more.

Nor should we forget that the Prime Minister was good enough to delegate someone in his place to Mukhtar's funeral. And this — by fate's own bitter irony — is a very great deal, for which the Prime Minister ought to be thanked. For we ought not to forget that Mukhtar was no partisan of official politics, nor one of those who basked in its favor, its affection, its approval; and so it is indeed a great deal for the Prime Minister to be good enough to delegate someone to represent him at the funeral of this dissenter — a man of art, certainly, but one who had spent his entire life for Egypt, not for any party among the parties, nor any faction among the factions. I will not deceive my fellow Egyptians: in events and crises such as this, we take stances that bring us no honor, that do not suit what we would wish for ourselves of dignity, and that give no encouragement to those who labor to keep laboring. And who has forgotten the deaths of those two great poets, Hafiz and Shawqi, and how politics conducted itself toward them? The opposition claimed Hafiz; the loyalists monopolized Shawqi; and now, only days ago, the opposition has claimed Mukhtar — literature and art sacrificed once more on the altar of partisan passions and appetites, and the Egyptians appearing in the guise of that filial ingratitude so unbecoming a noble people. I will not deceive my fellow Egyptians: they stand in need of raising themselves, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others, above this degrading station; they stand in need of lifting literature, learning, and art above the agendas of daily life, and the agendas of political rivalry — for there exist in life things loftier, purer, and nobler than politics and its rivalries, and literature, learning, and art are foremost among such things.

Hafiz's own circle once set out to immortalize Hafiz's memory, and did not succeed; and here is Hafiz, immortalizing his own memory all the same. And those who monopolized Shawqi among the men of official politics once set out to immortalize Shawqi's memory, and did not prevail; and here is Shawqi, immortalizing his own memory all the same. Is there, then, among the Egyptians, anyone who will set out to protect Mukhtar's works from loss, and to immortalize Mukhtar's memory — and if they do, will they succeed in what they intend? Or will politics intrude upon Mukhtar's cause and corrupt it, just as it corrupted the cause of Hafiz and of Shawqi? A painful question, one that perhaps ought never to have been asked — but see: its answer need not be a long one, and perhaps it will add no further pain to pain already felt, no further grief to grief already borne.