

The Martyrs

(“Al-Shuhadā” — Kawkab al-Sharq, 15 March 1933)

Taha Hussein

We were students in Paris. Some of us had begun our studies months before; others were expecting to complete theirs in months to come. Some of us had only recently left Egypt, having parted from it at the end of the summer; others had been long away from Egypt, having left it before the Great War was declared. Among us were those whom exile had kept for years — years that were all reversals and calamities, all trials and afflictions — and who longed to return to their homeland having done their work well, having satisfied their need for learning and study, and believing themselves able to go back to serve their country and to revive in it whatever life it lacked. And among us were those who were encountering Western life for the first time, in ignorance of it and in eagerness for it, hoping to meet with good, to bring back good, and to return to their homeland with their hands full of what benefits people and gives life to hopes.

The life around us had begun to grow calm and settle. The war of guns and all their instruments of destruction and annihilation had ended, and the war of tongues and pens raged over peace treaties and the systems of peace. The nations had secured what remained of their souls and their blood, but it was an uneasy security, deeply anxious: there was the fear that to the defeat of war would be added the defeat of peace, that hopes would die and despair would seize every heart; and there was the fear that victory in war would not be followed by victory in peace, and that all the enormous efforts — in lives and treasure, in aspirations and hopes — which the victorious nations had expended in pursuit of total victory would have been spent in vain.

And we Egyptians, in all of this, were living a quiet and untroubled life — yet one not free of humiliation and abasement. We were caught between the English, who were usurpers in Egypt and victors in Europe, and the Turks, who had been the holders of sovereignty over Egypt and who were now swallowing the bitterness of defeat in their own lands. We wished we could shake off the nominal sovereignty of the latter and the actual dominion of the former, and say simply that we were Egyptians — but we could find no way to do so.

The French administration kept watch over foreigners and was suspicious of them. From time to time it would send police officers to visit them and inquire into their circumstances, and from time to time it would summon them to the precinct stations, inspect their papers, and ask about their business, and then send them away, unmolested.

However much I may forget, I shall never forget the day I was summoned to the station for the police to inspect my papers and ask about my business. The officer began speaking to me. He asked about my nationality. I said: Egyptian. He said: What I am asking about is your allegiance. I said: Egyptian. He said: We do not recognize that Egypt has that standing. I said: Then I know of no other allegiance for myself. He thought for a moment, then said, in that big French voice of his, as though he had stumbled upon something strange: Now I have it — you are an Egyptian subject and under British protection. I left, heart-broken, spirit crushed, crestfallen, that sentence spinning in my head as though it were a spiked wheel tearing apart whoever it turns upon: “You are an Egyptian subject and under British protection.”

At the end of the day I met a number of my Egyptian colleagues and told them this story, and it turned out that every one of them had been asked the same question and heard the same words! And we felt that stinging pain which the heart finds and the tongue gives voice to, while the hands are powerless to repel it or to change it.

Such was our state in Paris after the armistice had been declared and the war had laid down its burdens. But reports began reaching us from Egypt at which we would shake our heads and our shoulders, expressing that sorrowful despair felt by one who sees a lofty, spacious hope and knows within himself that he is powerless to attain it or to reach it. The reports continued, and continued again; and the more steadily they came, the stronger they grew. No longer did they shake heads and shoulders; instead they began to trace a faint smile on lips and to spread a dim light across brows. Then the reports continued and grew stronger still, and the smiles grew wider and more radiant, and the light of life grew more beautiful and more brilliant, and tongues broke loose in short exchanges in which “if only” and “would that” kept recurring, and which we would close with that word, at once sweet and bitter in our circumstances: who knows?

Then came the great tidings. The smiles became laughter, every face was radiance, stillness became movement, immobility became energy, and we were all of us joy, all of us elation, hastening toward one another. What shall I say? We rushed to one another, and we embraced one another, and we congratulated one another, and hot tears ran down those radiant faces — but in their heat was the coolness of hope and expectation.

Egypt was in revolt. Egypt was resisting the English. Egypt was rising in the face of victorious Europe, demanding of it fidelity to its promise and fulfillment of its pledge. Egypt was delivering its leaders over to exile. Egypt was baring the breasts of its sons to the bullets. Egypt was staining its soil with the blood of Egyptians. And the French newspapers were publishing this in large type and bold print, speaking of it at length or in brief. And our heads — our heads had risen as though they had some business with the sky; they held themselves straight, turning to the French and asking them with a smile: What do you say about the sons of Egypt? Or else keeping silent about the news, and steering the conversation around until drawing it there so that the Frenchman would begin by saying: Tell me, what are the newspapers publishing about your country? You have a revolution, and I cannot but think it will be of consequence.

And we would then pour forth in talk about this revolution, and perhaps among us were those who did not scruple to exaggerate and to go to excess. Then the Wafd arrived in Paris, and we rushed to it and listened, and we heard from it nothing but words full of elation at what had been, and hope in what was to come, and wonder at the hardship of today, and confidence in Egypt tomorrow.

May God have mercy on the martyrs of 1919. Their lives shrank in their own eyes so that we might grow great in ours. They died, and their death gave us life.

May God have mercy on the martyrs. Not one of them was thinking of any one of us; indeed not one of them knew any one of us. They were thinking of Egypt, and they knew Egypt, and they gave their lives in the cause of Egypt. And we were kept alive by all of this — nay, by the mere tidings of all of this.

In God's keeping, and in the cause of the homeland: these pure and noble souls that went as a ransom for Egypt's independence and her dignity, and that opened for her the path to glory and eminence in this modern age. The circumstances of life have changed upon us, and the circumstances of life will continue to change upon us. We have met with good and with evil, we have found contentment and anger, and we shall meet with both again, and shall take our share of both. But we have always remembered, and shall always remember, that these pure and noble souls were the ones who gave us our first taste of national pride, and were the ones who told us and convinced us that we are able to be, like other people, honored, esteemed, and independent.

Martyrs in truth, those who went in Egypt's cause in 1919; and martyrs in truth, those who followed in their footsteps after that, dying as they died in the cause of liberty, honor, and independence. They are martyrs because they sacrificed their lives and their hopes in the cause of an idea — the idea of independence. And they are martyrs because they were driven to this sacrifice by that sacred religious feeling which nothing can withstand, and which does not hesitate to take up dangers, however great, as a means to victory and an ascent to the highest ideal.

They are martyrs because they are unknown; they are martyrs because they are wronged. Do you not see that they are persecuted still, to this very day? Do you not see that approaching their memory must be done with caution, that to speak of them is not allowed, and that their very mention is feared as a threat to order?

They are martyrs on the day they met death, and they are martyrs on the day their memory meets all manner of persecution. Their souls are in the garden of eternity, and their memory is in the hearts of all Egyptians. And even if the people are prevented from holding these ceremonies and demonstrations — which do not profit the martyrs themselves, but profit the people, because they revive in them those sacred feelings which every national government ought to revive: the feelings of love for the homeland and of sacrifice in its cause — no power on earth shall come between the hearts of the people and the revival of this memory. The hearts of the people will be filled with these martyrs always, and these martyrs will remain before the souls of the people always as a supreme example of ransoming the homeland with the dearest thing they possess in life.