

# Two Revolutions

*Al-Katib al-Masri, May 1946*

One took place in Italy during the first century before Christ, and the second in Iraq during the third century of the Hijra. The first exposed the whole Roman Republic to a grave danger, and the second exposed the whole Islamic Caliphate to a grave danger; and each produced, in what came after it, many serious consequences — just as each displayed, in what came after it, remarkable characteristics that specialists deserve to study, to investigate, and to reflect upon at length.

The first is the slave revolt in Italy, the one led by Spartacus; and the second is the Zanj Revolt in Basra, the one led by 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad, known as the Master of the Zanj.

The reader may wonder why I turn to this subject now that slavery has gone and the days of the enslaved are over, and there is nothing in people's present life to encourage thinking about this subject and devoting attention to it. I should like first of all to observe that individual slavery may well have disappeared along with its era — though I have no firm basis for saying so and am not entirely confident in it — but I do not know when social slavery will go the way of its days or when its days will pass. There: some peoples rob other peoples, and there are classes of people that rob other classes. With all that, it was not that I chose this subject to speak about the enslavement of peoples and the exploitation of one class by another — I chose this subject for another reason that I shall acquaint the reader with presently. And I should like also to observe before all else that collective slavery has not disappeared along with the era of individual slavery, and I do not know when it will end or when its days will pass.

I should also like to note, before anything else, that the slave revolt against the Roman Republic in Italy aroused a great deal of discussion; the ancient historians wrote about it, and the moderns wrote about it; it even influenced some of the moderns in their social and political views, and it has continued to inspire European writers to the present day — and this is what impelled me to address this subject in this discussion.

I recently read a remarkable novel by the Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler, its subject being Spartacus and the slave revolt against Rome. I asked myself: why has the Zanj Revolt produced nothing in our literary

life comparable to what this ancient Italian revolt produced? The historians recorded its events just as the Roman historians recorded the events of the Italian revolt, and contemporary poets wrote a great deal of verse about the revolt, just as the Roman men of letters had previously spoken in Latin and Greek about the revolt of Spartacus; but the Europeans did not forget the history of Rome and its events, nor did they regard it as mere history with nothing more to it — they made it a part of their lives and of the actual living life they lead from day to day. They draw inspiration from it as they draw inspiration from Greek history, from the myths of the Greeks and Romans, and from the Torah in what they write of prose and what they compose of verse. We, on the other hand, turn away from Arab history almost completely; we scarcely pay it any mind except for the heroic age that we all join together in loving and admiring — so we speak of the era of the Prophecy and the era of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, we recall Damascus as the capital of the Umayyads, Baghdad as the capital of the Abbasids, Cairo as the capital of the Fatimids; we recall all this seeking in it the pride of antiquity, and seeking in it the lesson and the example as well, and seeking in it what drives us to earnestness and kindles energy in us and consoles us for some of what we encounter that does not befit our dignity or accord with our ancient glory. All this is good beyond doubt; but it is also good to look at our history as a source of literary inspiration, and as a portion of our actual life from which the connecting threads between us and it have never been severed — for we still share with the ancients what they felt and what they sensed, and nothing separates us from them but that evolution which the living cannot do without.

It may be worth noting that a great many of us think about social justice and feel communities' need for it, yet look beyond the Mediterranean for the sources of this feeling of need for social justice, and the demand for it and the striving toward it: they look to moderate democracy, look to national and international socialism, look toward communism — having tended toward hesitation and doubt in many things. But they scarcely look, or do not look at all, toward the idea of social justice as Muslims had already found it before the middle of the first century of the Hijra, let alone toward the small number of those who tried to trace the rise of this idea and its development in Islamic environments, before it was influenced by foreign cultures and after it was influenced by them, and what it had as its effect in our intellectual life in philosophy, theology, jurisprudence, and the principles of law — quite apart from thinking to draw inspiration from this dimension of

Islamic life when they write prose or compose verse. For all that, the demanding writers and poets of all the Islamic lands had the right to study it from their own quarter and to illuminate it, and had the right as writers and poets to inspire the masses whenever they wrote and composed.

I do not by any means wish in this discussion to call for the revival of the movements of the Kharijites, the Zanj, and the Qarmatians; nor do I wish to call for us to borrow from Europe this doctrine or that of those demanding social justice. What I would love is for our writers to draw attention to the fact that they have a splendid history in demanding social justice that deserves to be returned to from time to time — for were we to do so we would have taught those among our predecessors who had preceded us in seeking the principles of organising social life that were not discovered in Europe until the nineteenth century or in the age of the Great French Revolution.

We are therefore not dependents, nor can we be dependents, upon the Europeans as regards those demanding social justice from those who rebelled against injustice; we are the furthest of people from them in time and the closest to the practice of this kind of reform. Among our ancestors who demanded social reform, some demanded it in gentleness and leniency, and some demanded it through revolt and violence, and some of them lit the fires of rebellion upon the established orders, almost wiping out their authority.

And the two revolutions I wish to touch upon in this discussion portray for us a variety of the displeasure that literary men deserve to reflect on. The slave revolt in Rome arose from a custom of the Romans that was ignoble by habit: they bought slaves and trained them in the arts of combat that ends in death, until they endowed these arts with the spirit of spectacle in the arenas, arranged for the gladiators to sell one another, and made a pleasure of what lay between them of blows, bloodshed, and lives cut down. The Romans delighted in all this pleasure when a man struck down a man, and delighted when an animal struck down an animal, and delighted when the combat was between a man and an animal. And in the days of the Republic and at the threshold of the Empire, they used to demand from their masters and rulers, as is well known: bread and the games.

In one of the Italian cities there was a man who ran a gladiatorial establishment and had assembled a company of slaves, training them in

this loathsome culture and exposing their combats to spectators from time to time; the school of this man in the city of Capua numbered nearly seventy, and was free of any restraint and was assisted by the police force — they could not resist the slaves as they advanced, but rather additional numbers had joined the slaves, not those taken for combat but those taken for service in its various forms. All that was needed was for the news to spread and for people to accept it, so that the terror of the slaves spread and their numbers grew. Then matters went beyond the circle of the slaves to those who resembled the poor and the destitute who worked in the fields, who ate nothing, and who endured whatever misery came their way; and the host swelled and grew until it became a danger that the Republic reckoned with. Then those people expanded beyond all these to all kinds of people who were not free slaves and had not been born free paupers, but who were displeased with the social order and saw in it injustice that deserved to be raised and put right. Among them were some versed in letters and eloquence, and among them were some who had studied in the school of gladiatorial combat, fled the arena, and become those trying to change the ugly social order. I need not list here the defects of the order against which these people were rising; it is enough to observe that the great Roman revolt had been confined to the hands of a small, countable company of people — those who owned the land and enslaved the free, those who monopolised trade within Italy from across the sea, and those who monopolised the exercise of power in all the provinces of the Empire and exploited it for themselves rather than for the people. It was by virtue of this colossal wealth that they were able to raise armies at their own expense, to raise them in Italian lands and in the provinces of the Empire, and to use them to achieve whatever they desired of gains and ambitions.

At that time a great many of the free people of Italy had lost what they had owned of the land and become dependants of the wealthy, living off them; they gave the wealthy their votes in the elections just as the wealthy gave them their sustenance when they found themselves in difficulty, and raised the threat of war against them. And at that time uprisings were rife in the provinces: a revolt in Spain, a state of unrest in the affairs of Asia. And at that time Rome was dominated by a group of pirates who had taken control of the sea routes just as they controlled the trade, and had disposed of the authority of the state in a way that was almost total destruction. So it was no surprise that when the rebels erupted and the great company of rebels grew it was reckoned a danger, threatening the entire system. The Senate sent an army to crush those

rebels and drove it against them; the army drove the rebels to the summit of a mountain and besieged them there, cutting off their provisions, and camped in the belief that they would descend to submit in due course. But the rebels climbed down the mountain carefully until they reached a safe place, circled around the mountain, took the army by surprise with a terrible rout, killed many of them, and seized what was in the camp of weapons and equipment, growing bolder thereby and gathering in strength; fear grew in Rome, so another army was sent, which fared no better than the first. Then another army was sent, led by consuls — but this army did no better either, and was routed as the two armies before it had been routed.

The victory of the rebels spread the call for them throughout Italy and exposed the free people to the call to join them; the slaves were urged to join them — until the Italian cities faced the permanent danger that came to them from without by this great army, and from within by those slaves who worked in the houses, the shops, and the counting-houses. Rome therefore turned its attention specially to this matter, and chose to combat those rebels a man distinguished among his peers by a dual characteristic: his enormous wealth, unmatched by any other wealth accumulated in Rome, and the vast ambition that gave him the power to bestride the wealthy and the poor alike — a characteristic undermined by nothing but the man's incapacity and the smallness of his abilities. Yet he could see his companions and peers running the high offices and directing the affairs of the state and governing the provinces, every one of them receiving what they wished in large amounts or small.

This is Marcus Crassus, whom Rome chose to combat the rebels, and with him sent a large, well-equipped army. So he continued to pursue the rebels, defeating them at times and routed by them at others, until he drove them away toward Asia and took from them most of the regions, chasing them to something resembling a peninsula, seizing from them most of their regions and having the last of them cornered before him. There he besieged the rebels and they dug a trench between him and them and stood upon it as a strong rampart, awaiting his assault. But the rebels suffered terrible privation, for provisions had been cut off from them and they endured hunger, pain, and illness; their leader Spartacus urged them to surrender and spoke to them of the Roman commander as willing to grant them their freedom so they could do what they willed — but Crassus refused to submit on any condition whatsoever, as people say. So Spartacus grew desperate, as did his companions, and they

refused to surrender — so they crossed the trench fighting. There Spartacus rushed forward and told his companions: if I win I shall need no horse, and if I do not win I shall spare no horse to take its place. Then the battle was joined; Spartacus routed Crassus and killed most of his companions and took them prisoner; while Crassus, from those prisoners, made a mockery for those who tried to challenge the social order, erected crosses along the road between the sea and Rome, and crucified every company of prisoners assembled, until the road between the sea and Rome was filled with crucifixions, screaming, and blood. Crassus believed this victory would secure him dominion over Rome; but the Senate could not look upon this victory except as a quite modest one — for it was a victory won not over trained armies but over slaves. And Crassus was nonetheless able with all that to use his enormous wealth and the glory of this victory to form an alliance with Pompey and Caesar, and the three divided the Empire among themselves. Asia fell to Crassus and he went to it with his great army; but it did not go as he had wished. He plunged into the Parthian War with the arts of combat and arrogance, lacking the skills of politics and war and not heeding the advice of those who advised him — so his son was killed first, and then he himself was killed, rightly so.

And we can look at this revolt from the perspective of two of its protagonists: one is Spartacus the leader of the revolt, and the other is Crassus its suppressor. As for the first — he had been a slave in Thrace and had been brought from there by someone who sought to deal in slaves, so the enslaved were transferred from place to place and from hand to hand until they ended up in the possession of the gladiatorial establishment owner in that Italian city. He was a man of great physical strength, towering toward the sky, broad in bearing, courageous and knowing no fear, resolute and knowing no hesitation, content with nothing but to return to his homeland and resume that simple life he had led before slavery stretched its hand over him. And had his companions heeded him they might have reached what he desired; he was forever earnestly urging them to leave this unjust land and disperse — each returning to his own homeland — and resume the simple life each had lived before slavery was laid upon him. But his companions did not obey and did not heed him; they were few at first, then became a great multitude; and their multitude prevailed over them but did not spare them from death.

Spartacus was not one to delight in anything as he delighted in looting, plundering, and raiding the peaceful cities. And had his companions agreed to return to their homelands, he would have settled in this region or that of the Italian regions and lived in peace and tranquillity, and it would have been possible for them to live a settled and peaceful life, and he would have defended himself and this life if they needed to defend it. But his companions did not hear him; their hearts were filled with fury and resentment, their souls wrathful and alert — they were wronged people who did not wish merely to liberate themselves from injustice, but wanted to wrong people as their own masters had wronged them, to make people taste what their masters had made them taste of humiliation and degradation. So they attacked the cities, looted, pillaged, and laid waste to them, filling their hands with what was not theirs from the money of the peaceful pious, holding some people at bay on the one hand and tempting the weak and seekers of gain as their subordinates on the other. Their numbers could not but grow day by day as more people flocked to them, so they entrenched themselves ever more deeply among enemies and allies alike. And Spartacus was compelled to take his companions by the reins and drive them toward earnestness and forbid them from the sin of approaching those companions; but some among them had gone too far from him and been lost to him, and others had heard him and were unable to cling long to the gentle life they had found nothing in to sustain them and no one on which to lean — so they went back and filled the land with evil from all around them, bringing down upon themselves the end that could already be foreseen.

As for the suppressor of the revolt, Crassus — as you have seen — he was a man without limit to his wealth and without limit to his ambitions, and without limit to his incapacity and shortcomings. He was skilled in nothing but one thing: the accumulation of money, taking it with his right hand in small measure and taking it without right in great quantity; he was an excessively usurious money-lender. He bore down upon the weak and eased the way for the wealthy and men of influence; he took from those the money because he expected nothing else from them, and gave these his money and took no financial profit from them, because he expected from them influence and power. When his affairs rose high and he needed the influence of the wealthy and the arms of the poor, he gladly gave up money to all of them together, so he put on lavish feasts for all the people of Rome; he would hold a banquet covering a thousand tables, and he used to receive people of every class with much warmth

and affability — he was as Abu Nuwas says:

*A young man who buys fair praise with his wealth  
and knows that the wheel of fortune turns.*

But he did not buy fair praise alone with his money; he also bought with it ill repute and the hatred of the wretched — for he used to seek out those in need and buy from them what they owned at the most derisory prices; and perhaps he drove people to destitution and forced them to sell him what they owned. He used to track fire here and there and buy the houses where fire had broken out; and he had monopolised fire-fighting, forming a strong, organised company for it; so whenever fire broke out in a house he would negotiate with the owner over its sale and would not send the fire brigade to extinguish the fire until the sale was concluded. He had monopolised building materials in all their variety and the building trade in all its forms, and had assembled companies of slaves and freedmen to work at all this; so the city of Rome as a whole, or most of it, was his property; he had extensive estates in many other cities; he had agricultural land whose extent could scarcely be estimated in any census; and the revenues from all this flowed into his treasuries, and he spent from them freely and bought with them whatever he wished of what is for sale and of what is not. Yet this colossal wealth was insufficient to satisfy him or content him, for he aspired to power: wanting to be consul, governor of the provinces, commander of armies, victorious over enemies, and dominant over allies — and he believed his wealth should bring him all of this that he desired, nor was he wrong; for the political and social order was so corrupt that his wealth did indeed bring him all he desired. He bought Pompey, bought Caesar, bought the members of the Senate, bought the votes of the electors, rose to the highest offices of state, gained control over Asia and governed its kings, and pursued much tyranny and oppression until he met death as others like him meet it — as if he had not owned the wealth he owned, had not attained the authority he attained, had not dominated the nobles of Rome and the kings of Asia as he had dominated them.

And so the leader of the revolt Spartacus was killed, as was the suppressor of the revolt Crassus. The first strove in the cause of his own freedom and the freedom of his companions and in the cause of justice, and won the freedom that ended for him and his companions in death, and won nothing of justice either for himself or for others, and could not prevent his companions from doing injustice to the land and filling it with tyranny and wrong. And the second strove for wealth without end and for

power without limit, trampled the right and duty underfoot, dishonoured virtue in the cause of appetite, corrupted the people, abused the authority of the ruler, led the armies not to what he desired but to defeat and to the degradation of the death that followed, which no one could foresee. All this was the situation in Italy during the first century before Christ. As for the events of Iraq — they resembled it in many respects and differed from it in many, and were no lesser than it in any case.

'Abdullah ibn Muhammad, the Master of the Zanj, was not wealthy nor anything resembling wealth, and in all probability he was nothing remarkable, and but for this revolt history would be as ignorant of him as it is ignorant of the millions that no census can enumerate from every generation. Yet he seems to have been a man of keen intelligence and far-reaching aspiration, of delicate sensibility and sharp temperament, disciplined in his affairs and master of his will, enduring what was hateful to him without difficulty or effort.

He lived — so the historians say — in Baghdad in contact with some of the well-known servants at the Palace of the Caliphate, and he saw corruption filling the earth around him. He saw the corruption of politics, the corruption of the social order, the corruption of morals, the worship of pleasure here and the worship of appetite there. He saw life around him as incessant adventure: a man of high rank falls low, a man of low rank rises; a poor man is raised by adventure to broad wealth and a wealthy man brought by adventure to the narrow straits of misery; unknown men come from here and there and there they rise to the highest offices and monopolise the affairs of the Caliphate and dominate the lives of the Caliphs. He saw all this from close up and his soul rejected it most vehemently. Was his soul rejecting this because it was a noble soul that loved good and hated evil and aspired to justice and preferred virtue? Or was his soul rejecting this because it was an ambitious soul that wished to participate in what the adventurers participated in and to take its share of the world? A question open to reflection. The historians hold that he was nothing but a wicked adventurer who kept the good for himself, coveted power, and committed sins in pursuit of that which would make the hair of children turn white; the historians never call him anything but "the Wicked One" and "the Accursed," never describe him except as an enemy of God and an enemy of the Muslims. But what would the historians have called him had he triumphed? What would the historians have described him as had victory been granted him?

*People tell the man they meet with good what he desires most,  
and condemn the blunderer — a fool's curse upon him.*

Whatever the case may be, 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad detested what he saw in Baghdad, and detested what was carried to Baghdad from the news of the Islamic regions, for the throne of the Caliphate was agitated most violently — the Turks were tampering with it in the capital and seizing authority from the Caliph and making the Caliphs taste of the humiliation and degradation they desired; the princes and governors and the ambitious in the regions were seizing hold of what was in their hands and setting up independent states in East and West, sometimes placating the central authority and sometimes confronting it with aggression and war; and for every powerful man there were weak men he exploited, and for every rich man there were poor men he exploited. What wonder, then, that 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad should reject all this and speak of all of it, or some of it, to some of his companions, and plot with them to adventure as people had adventured and try to change this evil as people before him had tried, as they were trying in his own day to change all of this? And he moved with this intention from Baghdad to Hajar and tried to cause a stir there, and came close to succeeding but for the tribal rivalries stirred up around him and the many killings among his companions and his enemies; the people came to hate him and Hajar grew too tight for him, so he moved to al-Ahsa', then al-Ahsa' grew too tight for him, so he moved to the desert, travelling among the Arab encampments calling them to his doctrine; the Arabs responded to him at times and resisted him at others, until the desert too grew tight for him, and he began thinking of a direction to head toward to begin his adventure and bring it to its end.

And here the historians speak of him in wondrous terms, claiming he spent a long time in thought one day, and lo a cloud appeared in the sky above him, thunder rumbled and lightning struck, and he heard in the sound of the thunder something, and told his companions that it ought to be Basra. And it is claimed by the historians that he used to speak to his companions at times of varieties of the unseen, saying things which appeared to him as Quranic verses, reciting them with the confidence of one who had them by heart — a scribe wrote them down for him, and said the scribe had seen these verses, or the historians claimed the scribe said he had seen them — and he was content with the role of Imam, deeming himself too light to bear the burden of Prophethood.

It is permissible that 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad may have claimed all this or some of it to his companions, for this was a way of spreading the

doctrine and a means of stirring the masses. It is also permissible that the historians burdened themselves with this, being resentful of him and wishing to leave him without credit; for the thing about which there is no doubt is that he intended to head to Basra to stir trouble there, warned the Sultan of it, took some of his companions with him and fled to Baghdad, then returned there with a company of adventurers to govern it. Until, when the governor of Basra was removed, he began his perilous adventure there — six years after planning and preparation.

He began his perilous adventure in the month of Ramadan in the year two hundred and fifty-five: he made contact with the slaves who worked around Basra in sweeping the salt marshes, in reclaiming the land, in extracting salt, and in other works of this kind, for which the people of Basra had enslaved tens of thousands of black slaves. And it appears that the owners of the capital were cruel to those slaves, calling them names and imposing upon them harsh treatment and pinching their sustenance, and burdening them with work greater than what they could bear. The evidence of this is that 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad had barely reached them before they gathered around him and followed him eagerly; and when he was about to give them their freedom and swear to them that he would make them masters, promising them the land after they had been slaves owned by their masters, and making their masters' slaves own their masters in turn. And the slaves listened and feared and marvelled at what he promised. Had they not in fact ruled, on one day, over some of their masters, their agents, and their servants? Then he chose from among those black slaves the leaders and commanders for the army, making them equal with the Whites on the villages and the ships, dividing among them the villages and ships, so that no distinction remained between slave and free — they had all become free; there was no distinction between black and white, and no person had a right over another save by the merit of obedience and upright conduct.

So the call spread among the slaves; they multiplied and their numbers swelled; the masters grew anxious and sent to him to buy them back at five dinars per head, and proposed to him matters of betrayal and flight — but he paid this no attention and did not heed it; he was absorbed entirely in spreading his call, liberating the slaves, and winning the hearts of the poor and the destitute. When a great army was sent to him by the Sultan, the Sultan's forces were on the Tigris and on the canals and waterways — when the Sultan's forces met him, he crushed their commander and routed him, and the governor was greatly agitated

in Basra when word reached him that they were within reach of his hand, that nothing prevented him from seizing them whenever he wished and however he wished. And the central Sultan in Baghdad sent the governor the army along with the army; until there could scarcely be found a thing of that region of Iraq; the Master of the Zanj's alarm spread, and terror swept Basra, the Ahwaz, and Abadan, until the people were forced to flee in search of war and flight.

And he himself kept moving from place to place, leading this army, fortifying a city when there was no city there, sometimes changing himself, sometimes sending his companions on the offensive — until when he was confident of the capacity to storm Basra he drove his companions to it, killed many of the people in a terrible and deplorable way, and filled it with pillage from what they had at hand, and was forced to flee with those who remained; he seized the prisoners from the free Arabs and non-Arabs, the finest of men and the most generous of women, distributed them among his companions as goods are distributed in the markets for buying and selling, just as the Zanj had been sold in the markets for buying and selling. And the lieutenant governor was greatly distressed by this affair, and sent against him an army the like of which Baghdad had not seen since long ago; and the Master of the Zanj confronted the lieutenant governor's armies time after time, yet defeat was always recorded against him in most cases. And the lieutenant governor was sometimes forced to withdraw from the war, either from despair of victory or because the Caliphate was in need of another war in the East no less serious than the Zanj war. What matters is that throughout all this the Master of the Zanj's affairs spread across the regions of the Islamic state, filled Iraq with terror and pillage, and he settled for himself in Baghdad and governed all the surrounding regions, spending from his treasury on managing and reinforcing his army, and spending on it — and he had organised this region of Iraq's territory in the best possible order, harnessing in it the waterways and rivers as means of transport, then using them as routes for war when armies fought along the waterways, the waterways becoming the fields of combat when armies fought on the water, and taking as navigators these river craft from the small boats and the large. And the Sultan's armies and the Master of the Zanj's armies pursued one another both on the face of the water and on the face of the land.

And when the Master of the Zanj's affairs grew great and he became a danger not only to what bordered him of the regions and provinces, but

to the very capital of the Caliphate itself, the Caliph handed back management of the whole affair to his brother, gave him free rein over the state's money to spend as he wished, and gave him free rein over the state's armies as well to direct as he wished and fund as he wished from whatever was needed. And the lieutenant governor undertook this war this time with the determination never to withdraw until he had brought the matter to a close.

And it was granted to him what he wanted; but after spending whatever effort, after enduring whatever hardship, after sacrificing tens of thousands of the army, and after himself and his commanders and soldiers exposed themselves to any risk, he knew in these last days that he had spent money on an affair with no settled end and without reprieve, and his rulings were not executed according to custom and habit, but rather were a harsh dictatorship imposed upon it, having monopolised most of the regions of the Caliphate and claimed to have mastered them. And the lieutenant governor was troubled one day, his brother the Commander of the Faithful having grown oppressive around him and his soldiers, and his brother was suggesting to him to swear allegiance to Ibn Tulun, wishing to go to Egypt to live in the shadow of Ibn Tulun in anger at his brother. But the lieutenant governor was more resolute in purpose, stronger in will, and broader in plan; so he ordered some of his commanders in the provinces to meet the Caliphate's viziers, commanders, and leaders and round them up and drive them back to Baghdad if they would not return of their own will. And the commander obeyed his master's order and drove the Commander of the Faithful and his companions to the capital. And the lieutenant governor took firm control of the affairs that had been yielding ground to the Caliphate and went into war without gentleness and without leniency, offering his son Abu al-'Abbas before himself and waiting for him to risk himself, and for the commanders to risk themselves and for the soldiers to risk themselves — was he not himself risking his own self whenever the opportunity arose?

And the Master of the Zanj's affairs had reached such heights that he took for himself and his new commanders cities and fortified them; he resided in the chosen city, a second commander resided in the comfortable city, a third commander resided in the protected city. The land around filled with soldiers and the tools of war, and the rivers and canals filled with ships; so the lieutenant governor set up for himself a city he called the War Base, gathering in it everything people needed in

peace and war — utilities and crafts. And the Master of the Zanj's armies continued to harass the lieutenant governor's armies month after month and year after year, until they forced him to abandon the plan of attack and commit to defending these cities and their fortresses, falling back city by city and fortress by fortress, until the defeated stragglers arrived at the chosen city where the Master of the Zanj was encamped, and the people multiplied in this city until it was crowded and they were wearied of accommodating them. But the lieutenant governor advanced until he struck a siege around it and cut off the provisions from it, and there the lieutenant governor's distinction and superiority were revealed — qualities that could not have been revealed in the war against Spartacus. The lieutenant governor's power was enormous, and he was capable of seizing the city with his own hands, and capable of storming it at the cost of tremendous casualties; but he began instead to offer the Master of the Zanj a security pact. For if the Master of the Zanj refused submission he was a strange warrior — an adventurer fighting from fear rather than desire; and the security pact and pardon and indulgence were lawful for any of the Master of the Zanj's commanders and soldiers who wished them, with nothing preventing it. So some people asked him for the security pact, and he responded to them with kindness and generosity, was good to them and honoured them and rewarded them, then displayed them in their new form on a ship to show the spectators from the walls what pleasures awaited them. And the more this scene was a source of desire and temptation — the more the Master of the Zanj's commanders were filled with this temptation and gave themselves up to the lieutenant governor as followers and supporters, becoming his commanders and his guides!

And when the lieutenant governor's companions seized some of the prisoners and they refused to ask for clemency, he had their necks cut, then assembled their heads to the spectators in the arena, on ships, so that those watching from the walls saw it with terror and dread. And the lieutenant governor feared the people greatly, attracted people greatly, until the time came for them to attack the walls and storm the city and demolish the fortresses fortress by fortress, house by house — and he attained what he desired after great difficulty and violent effort.

All the while 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad, the Master of the Zanj, was resisting as the best resistance can be, and defending as the most violent defence can be — for his resolute companions' hearts did not quail, and he was indeed defending what was within his capacity in his city, then

defending it house by house until the enemy stormed it; then defending every span of land until his supporters scattered from him, some killed and some fleeing and some killed without flinching, there he stood defiant in flight and would not budge from his position, going only from place to place; and he even quarrelled with those who besieged him until he saw his head from behind the walls and waited for them with pamphlets. And it is established that a company of his commanders remained with him, defending as he defended and performing as he performed; some were killed in the field and some taken to Baghdad, and crucified and placed upon the banks of the river.

The people thought the Zanj revolt had ended; but years pass, and another revolt appears in Iraq, filling the land with terror — not in Iraq alone, but in the Arabian Peninsula and in the Levant, and perhaps reaching the edges of Egypt. Basra was the victim of the Zanj revolt, then Kufa became the victim of the Qarmatian revolt. Was there no reason for these two revolts? Rather there was one common cause for both: the cause was the rebellion against the political and social order that had gone to all extremes in oppression and wrong, and their aim was one — the realisation of justice in the land after injustice and wrong had corrupted it — and their result was one: this horror that filled souls and razed cities; and this enormous effort that did not remove injustice but merely replaced it with another injustice, and tried to bring justice to people but brought them nothing of justice. It is thus written upon humanity that the efforts devoted in the cause of reform to removing injustice and establishing justice should be wasted, and that those who try to remove injustice and establish justice should become enemies of justice themselves. They wanted to save themselves and the people from the injustice of the oppressors; so they freed themselves from this injustice and accepted the first evil, then exceeded the oppressors' injustice, and freedom became tyranny and equality became exploitation and injustice became an aspiration; and the word "justice" went among people as: a constant striving toward the highest ideals, a constant incapacity to reach those ideals or arrive at them, and a constant injustice, in the course of all that, toward the unjust and others alike.

And the revolt of Spartacus revealed two men: the leader of the revolt and its suppressor. As for the Zanj revolt, it revealed many men, and I cannot naturally speak of all of them; I shall only note briefly that it revealed two men from among the state's guardians of order, and revealed a distinguished company of people all worthy of having their

names preserved by history from the side of the revolt. It was not 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad alone who rose in the revolt and not he who relied on the Zanj alone; rather he rose with a company of companions who were of the same generation as him — some came from among the common people with no prior record and no family of note, such as al-Bahrani, who had been a grain-measurer in his homeland before his circumstances led him to the Master of the Zanj, and who became thereafter an experienced commander, an astute politician, and a far-sighted administrator; and some were from old established families, from the ancient aristocratic clans, such as 'Ali ibn Aban al-Muhallabi, he who claimed lineage to the suppressor of the Kharijite revolt in the days of the Umayyads and who became an external dissident alongside the Master of the Zanj, and who showed brilliance in war, shrewdness in politics, and patience in adversity matched only by Abu al-'Abbas ibn al-Muwaffaq; and others came from every direction, and events revealed among them men of genuine distinction, no less ready to undertake great deeds and mighty affairs than the Aristocracy that had monopolised the business of government. If all this points to anything, it points first of all to the fact that the spirit of adventure was widespread and common among all classes, and that the spread of education had opened for people — and for the adventurers among them in particular — doors that had not previously been open to them, and made them feel that what was imposed on them of those systems of governance riddled with corruption, and what was imposed on them of those social systems built upon injustice and wrong, was all rightly to be changed; so they tried to change it wherever they found a way to do so. They succeeded at first here and there, then were overtaken by failure everywhere — because the development of reason had not yet reached the point where it could master instinct and desire. And I believe you will agree with me that reason's development has not yet reached this point up to the present; for most revolutions that arose in the modern era to change the political and social order and restore the people to justice and equality have attained but the smallest part of that, and most of it remains a hope awaited and a destination beyond reach!

And let us pause for a very brief moment at the leader of the Zanj revolt, 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad, and the suppressor of this revolt, Abu Ahmad al-Muwaffaq ibn al-Mutawakkil. As for the first — he was genuinely a man from among the common people, and the historians claimed he had claimed descent from the family of 'Ali without being of them in anything, and that he vacillated in the chain of his lineage

between Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn; the historians also claimed his lineage might be in 'Abd al-Qays, and it is permissible that his lineage should be in 'Abd al-Qays, and it is also permissible that he had no tribal lineage at all among the Arab tribes.

The historians claim that he was not of them in anything, that he vacillated in the chain of his lineage between Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn; and they claimed also that his lineage might be in 'Abd al-Qays; and it is permissible that his lineage be in 'Abd al-Qays, and permissible also that he had no lineage in any of the Arab tribes; and the most likely is that he paid none of this any attention in his own mind, between himself and his companions, but only laid claim to some of it to win the hearts of the common people and gather them around him — for the common people throughout Iraq, the Arab lands, and parts of the Persian lands were convinced that any change in the political order, if it were destined to come, would come only at the hands of an 'Alid line connected to the House of the Prophet.

The certain thing is that 'Abdullah ibn Muhammad was a man of resolution and tenacity, as he was a man of ambition and aspiration. Everything in his biography points to soundness of opinion, firmness of determination, and steadfastness of principle — courage that knows no weakness or flagging, and a flexibility that knows no hesitation before difficulties. And the historians add to him many iniquities of an abhorrent kind, and in all probability he committed many of these iniquities: he was excessive in killing and destruction, allowed his companions to plunder money, returned the free to slavery as he returned the enslaved to freedom; but much of these iniquities should not be laid upon him alone, but upon his era and upon those who lived in that era, whether among those who preserved the old order and those who wished to change it. And every revolution dangerous to the political and social systems brings in its wake varieties of horror that good nature cannot bear, that reason cannot sanction, and that religion cannot approve — but they occur nonetheless, because it is instinct that drives toward them, and it is instinct that revolts; and when instinct revolts, it rarely knows a limit at which to stop. People know the horrors of the French Revolution as they know the horrors of the Communist Revolution, and people do not hate revolution for nothing, but hate it for what the revolution drives them to of horror, for what it involves of sin, and for what people commit in it of abominations. And yet the historians sometimes err, and forget that they are writing about "the Wicked Enemy of God," the Accursed One, the

Master of the Zanj — sometimes they err and forget all this, and record things that point to honesty and leniency and do not issue from a wicked traitor who deliberately seeks evil and takes the Devil as his imam. He refuses, for example, to authorise the raiding of a village because a man from that village had killed one of his companions, wanting before striking this village to ascertain and establish that the villagers are innocent and not in league with his companions in their sin. He encounters some villagers who come forward offering him their money to have him leave them alone, so he rewards them well and leaves them their money and does not trap them with any treachery. He senses the Zanj fearing that he will abandon them or surrender them because of the quantity of inducements directed at him, so he gathers them and reassures them and asks them to surround him with a group that watches his conduct, and if they see in him any deviation from the covenant or any inclination toward the inducements they are to deal with him accordingly. And he holds to his covenant and stands firm on his principle: he does not ask for clemency when clemency is offered, does not surrender when he despairs of victory, does not try to save himself when hope is gone — but fights on until he is killed.

As for his adversary Abu Ahmad — he was not, as you have seen, from ordinary people, but from the line of the Caliphs: his father was al-Mutawakkil ibn al-Rashid. And the line of the Caliphs around him had been visited by weakness and been overtaken by languor, had grown so indolent that pleasure had come to dominate it, and then the slaves of the servants in the palaces and the soldiers outside the palaces came to dominate it; so the emergence of Abu Ahmad in this indolent, pleasure-sodden environment, and this remarkable superiority of his in administering politics, economics, and war, are all evidence that he was a man of outstanding talent, as complete as outstanding talent can be. And we would do him a grave injustice if we compared him to Crassus, the suppressor of the Italian revolt. Abu Ahmad was the complete opposite of this indolent, incapable Roman ruined by riches, leaving him neither courage nor integrity nor faith — the full and complete opposite: Abu Ahmad was the most courageous of the Abbasids in his era, the most courageous of those who served the Abbasids among the Turkic commanders and the general manumitted servants, and he possessed courage in its finest and most elevated meanings. He was strong over himself, then strong over his family and closest kin before being strong over others — he risked himself in the field of battle, and praised his son for risking himself in battle. If he sensed in his brother the Commander of

the Faithful hesitation, weakness, or agitation, he took him by the reins and returned him to purpose and compelled him to composure. And if he saw in his son himself, after a victory, excess in willfulness or ambition, he was ruthless toward him in the harshest way and cast him into the recesses of prison — paying no heed to his love for him and his tenderness toward him; and the people rose up in anger for the young prince, but Abu Ahmad met the protesters and returned them to calm, asking them: "Do you suppose you are more loving and kinder to him than his own father?"

Abu Ahmad knew no quiet and no rest. The affairs of the state were in the most violent agitation, and he was agitated as they were — confronting evil wherever it arose, trying to subdue Ibn Tulun in the West, suppressing the revolt in Iraq and in the east of the state; and when he was unable to move and was forced to take to his bed, he directed affairs from his bed. Then he was brought back to Baghdad, unable to ride, and was carried on a litter borne by forty men in turns; and he sensed that those carrying him were moved by compassion at carrying him, so he said to them along the way: "I wished I were one of you, striving as you strive and suffering as you suffer, feeling none of the pain and helplessness I feel" — but despite his pain and helplessness, he directed the affairs of the state to the very last moments of his life, imposing upon them a firm dictatorship that spared neither his son nor his brother from its authority.

Do our writers and poets not see that in the events of the ancient Arab history there is what can inspire them when they write prose or compose verse? Do our writers and poets not see that these events have the right to be looked upon from time to time, just as they look upon other events and other varieties of history?

*T. H.*

*Al-Katib al-Masri, May 1946*