

They Cry for Help . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 8 February 1934

Now is the time of hearts — hearts that were once hard as stone, through which nothing could pass; and now the senses have grown fine — senses that were once flint, on which nothing left a mark. And now justice has awoken — justice that lay sleeping, sunk deep in slumber; and now oppression has become hateful — oppression that was once beloved in men's souls; and now tyranny has turned bitter — tyranny that was once sweet, savored endlessly, indulged and doted upon and pursued to exhaustion.

And now the champions of oppression cry for help from the victims of oppression, and those who spread injustice across the land and raised its towering edifice to the sky now cry for help from those upon whom that injustice was poured out in torrents, upon whom that torment was spread wide. And now the friends of crime cry for help from those crime befell. And now the consciences of these people have grown uneasy, knowing at last that there is good in this world that must be sought, and evil that must be shunned, and that authority can rescue when called upon to rescue, can answer when summoned, and can shelter those who take refuge in it. And now those who call themselves men of the people feel that they too may be exposed to fear, and that they hold rights to protection from authority, which they now demand of it — and demand boldly. If this shows anything, it shows only the feebleness of any genuine feeling for life in the souls of these people. God is witness that we wish them no harm, for they are too paltry for us to wish harm upon; God is witness that we scheme no plot against them, for they are too contemptible for us to trouble ourselves plotting against. God is witness that we incite no one against them, for they are too insignificant for us even to consider inciting anyone against them; God is witness that we write nothing in celebration of their complaints when they complained, or of their cries for help when they cried out, for they are too lowly to merit attention whether they complain or cry for help. God knows we do not begrudge authority the protecting of them — though they have now become such weaklings that they fear their own shadows, after having once been men of such hardness that they revered nothing and feared nothing. God is witness that we write neither for them nor about them, for they are too slight in the eyes of others, too slight in their own eyes, and too slight in ours, to be worth writing for or about. We write only so

that people may see, in what has come to pass in Egypt, a lesson to be drawn; we write only so that people may see, in what these events have revealed of their consequences and effects, a warning to be heeded. These were people who counted for nothing in their own eyes, nor in the eyes of others, nor in the eyes of God. Ibrashi Pasha and Sidqi Pasha gathered them from every corner, drew them out of every nook, plucked them from every burrow, then assembled them in a place prepared for them, and said to them: be men — and they were. Then the two of them said to them: be a party — and they were. Then the two of them said to them: take up for yourselves this newspaper, which we shall create for you entirely, which we shall establish for you entirely, and on which we shall spend for you money whose source you do not know, though we know very well where it comes from. Spare yourselves no effort — we shall bear every effort on your behalf. Spend no money — we shall spend every penny for you; indeed, we shall spend upon you, yourselves, whatever sums you can imagine and cannot imagine. Fear nothing — we shall secure you against every fear. Do nothing — we shall relieve you of every task. It is enough that you speak when we make you speak, and enough that you fall silent when we silence you; enough that you move when we pull the string, and enough that you keep still when we let the string go slack. All we ask of you is that you be moving pictures and speaking statues, deceiving people about your own nature by feigning deeds and words, while in truth doing nothing and saying nothing. Consent to this, and if you consent, you shall have whatever you desire: you shall become masters of the land, the administration shall bow before you, the provincial directors shall submit to you, you shall be exempted from every obligation, and you shall impose upon others whatever obligations you please, even should the laws refuse to grant you privilege; you shall claim exemptions even should the Constitution refuse to grant you exemption. Outwardly you shall become everything, though in truth you are nothing.” So spoke Ibrashi Pasha and Sidqi Pasha to these people, and so these people listened, believed, and submitted to these two men, and so began the performance that went on for years. It was a farce fit to provoke laughter, but it ended in searing pain and bitter grief; it was a farce fit to amuse, but it gave rise to crimes that have forbidden this people any amusement, until its lost rights are restored, its violated sanctities respected, and this crushing humiliation lifted from it. These people, and their instruments among the men of the administration and the soldiers of the police, spread among the sons of the people every shade of oppression and injustice that would shame any man in whose veins blood still flows. Complaint was forbidden to the sons of the people,

and crying for help was denied to the sons of the people; the Public Prosecution was forbidden to listen to the sons of the people when they complained, or to respond to them when they cried for help; and judges were exposed to the wrath and vengeance of authority if they punished the oppressor and did justice by the oppressed. And truthful witnesses have told us that an innocent son of the people, in certain towns, would be taken to the police station, where torment would be poured out upon him in torrents, where whips would toy wantonly with his body, where blood would burst from his veins and stain his torn flesh — while he screamed and cried for help, and the sons of the people screamed and cried for help, and the torment poured on and on, and the whips toyed on and on, and the chief of police watched and listened, finding in what he watched and heard a criminal pleasure.

And a Greek man once witnessed a scene like this in the city where Qaisi Pasha held sway, and the foreigner's heart broke with grief for this Egyptian being tortured by Egyptians, and his foreign conscience blazed with anger for this Egyptian being humiliated by Egyptians, and he went to the Public Prosecution to demand justice and seek its aid, but the Prosecution could not bring itself to listen to him, for it had been ordered not to act. And the poor man went on enduring his torment, and the wretched sons of the people went on crying for help, and the foreign man went back, wringing his hands, powerless to do anything at all for these unfortunate souls. And all the while, the tyrants in Cairo lived in luxury, savoring their tyranny, and lavishing, upon their moving pictures and their speaking statues, the bounty God had granted them. And these moving pictures and speaking statues were praised, and praised to excess; commended, and drowned in commendation; and they declared that justice stood firm, that fairness was easily had, that order was secure, and that the shade of security lay spread over all. And the conscience of Sidqi Pasha and his successor, and the consciences of Qaisi Pasha and his aides, were tranquil and content, never troubling their owners by day, never keeping them awake at night.

But now — yes, now that this evil has been lifted from the people, now that groups of the people have shaken these men with a single stone, calling for the life of justice and its champions and for the fall of oppression and its champions — now these people are afraid, they who once found pleasure in making others afraid. Now these people cry for help, they who once found pleasure in helping no one, who once counted it a sin that the one crying for help should be helped, and the wronged

should be given justice. Now these people find in themselves the boldness to demand that the Prime Minister protect them, and to hold him responsible for the demonstrations — but why, then, did they not hold themselves responsible for the crimes they committed, and the sins they savored? And what is the matter with those who take part in innocent demonstrations, that they never feared to spill the people's blood, to seize its wealth, to violate its sanctities, to squander its rights, and to waste its interests?

Let the Prime Minister protect them, even though they face no danger. Let the Prime Minister post guards around their houses, even though no one fears their houses will be stormed.

Let the Prime Minister station soldiers and police around these people's houses, to protect them from illusion and guard them against fantasy — and let the Egyptians look at this police force, and at these soldiers, for perhaps they will recall another house, around which soldiers and police once stood, not to protect it, but to guard against it; not out of fear for it, but out of aggression against it.

Yes — the Egyptians may well recall the House of the Nation, around which Sidqi and his successors stationed soldiers sent not to protect it but to plot against it. And God has turned that plotting back upon the necks of Sidqi and his successors, so that they have now become the ones crying for help and seeking refuge — and the Prime Minister is the very best man to answer them in what they ask of him, of rescue and sanctuary.

[Taha Hussein]

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