

In Dr. Taha Hussein's Home

Al-Risala, 9 October 1939

By Dr. Zaki Mubarak

At the start of summer I had an appointment with the eminent Dr. Taha Bey Hussein, to present him with a copy of my book (*Layla, the Sick Girl in Iraq*) and to read some pages of it with him; but when I arrived at the appointed time, I did not find him at home, so I handed the book to a soldier standing guard there and went on my way. Nothing consoled me for missing Dr. Taha Hussein except a few blissful moments spent at the home of Miss Umm Kulthum, whose house stands only a few steps from Dr. Taha's.

The next day I telephoned to ask how I had come to miss the appointment; he apologized kindly and assured me he had entirely forgotten it, inviting me to set a new date. I told him I was preparing to travel to Baghdad to take part in the memorial services for King Ghazi, and that I would be sure to have the honour of meeting him upon my return. I would have loved to enjoy his company after I came back from Baghdad, but I feared he might have missed our first appointment on purpose — for the well-meaning sorts are still busy "mending" the ties between him and me.

Then Dr. Taha travelled to Paris, and word went round that he would send his apologies and not attend the coming academic year, so as to rest from the strain of university affairs and compose a book on the history of Arabic poetry. It was during that period that I had set about attacking Ustadh Ahmed Amin, and my pen, running away with itself, let slip a few jabs touching Dr. Taha Hussein without cause; and so I too shrank from going to pay him my respects when I learned he had returned from Paris. But then I resolved to do my duty and pay Dr. Taha the visit he was owed, hoping that in offering this greeting I might dispel some of the murk stirred up by those who earn their bread weaving rumour and gossip.

That was on the evening of the thirteenth of Sha'ban, with the moon lending the world all its arts of tenderness and warmth, reminding weary hearts of their beautiful past in the strife of youthful passion and enchantment. I got out of the car at the Fouad Bridge to let my heart and soul delight a while in watching the Nile face the moon on this night of its overflowing glory, and to enter Zamalek with proper reverence and

humility — for its precious soil is nothing but the scattered ashes of hearts and livers spent upon it. I made my way through Zamalek from one sanctuary to the next until I reached Dr. Taha Hussein's house. I had hoped to find him alone, since I arrived after nine o'clock, his usual quiet hour; but it seems his return from his travels had thrown the doors wide open, and I found his house alive with the company of a group of distinguished men — the professors Shafiq Ghorbal, Abd al-Wahid Khallaf, Mansour Fahmy, Ali Abd al-Raziq, Said Lutfi, Amin al-Khouli, Tawfiq al-Hakim, Abd al-Wahhab Azzam, Ibrahim Mustafa, and Abd al-Hamid al-Abbadi.

I greeted Dr. Taha with the greeting of a devoted admirer, and asked him about Paris and about the Sorbonne; he gave brief answers that showed he wished to conceal certain things from me. Had the war harmed some of my friends there? God forbid, God spare us! A moment later, Ustadh Ahmed Amin arrived; I rose to shake his hand, but he averted his face and pretended not to see me. I saw the occasion was no place to settle accounts with him for this, so I forced a smile, seething inside. The thought crossed my mind that my presence might spoil the gathering, and that it would be best if I left; but then I remembered that I, of all people, had the truest claim to Dr. Taha Hussein's friendship, however much intrigue had come between us for a time — I had been his true friend before today's friends had ever known him; I had been his intimate friend in circumstances where even a brother would not ask after his own brother. Why, then, should I leave his house to clear the air for a friend like Ahmed Amin? I resolved to stay the whole evening — and whoever found my presence troublesome was welcome to leave!

Once the cigarettes had gone round the room, Ustadh Amin al-Khouli began the conversation:

Amin al-Khouli: Zaki, will you never shake off the manners of Monufia?

Taha Hussein: And what are the manners of Monufia?

Amin al-Khouli: Trouble-making, stubbornness, and pig-headedness.

Taha Hussein: Zaki Mubarak, a trouble-maker? Say something else, Amin — people have never known Zaki to be anything but the very picture of kindness, refinement, and good taste. Dr. Zaki really is a gentle man; and one sign of his gentleness is that when he looks around and finds people grown weary of calm and quiet, he showers them with his

pen's projectiles, so they might taste the blessing of motion, argument, and struggle.

Ali Abd al-Raziq: It seems you're rather pleased with Dr. Zaki Mubarak.

Taha Hussein: What else can I be?

Zaki Mubarak: You could offer a word of advice, Doctor, if you saw anything that called for one.

Taha Hussein: No, my friend — God open the way!

Zaki Mubarak: It seems, Doctor, that you're angry with me.

Taha Hussein: I'm not angry — but I do have every right to be annoyed by some of what I read from you.

Abd al-Wahid Khallaf: Perhaps the Doctor means your articles attacking Ustadh Ahmed Amin.

Ahmed Amin: I object to raising this subject in this gathering.

Khallaf: It's a simple matter — we're only trying to clear the air between hearts.

Ahmed Amin: I can bear anything except an affront to my dignity.

Taha Hussein: And has Zaki Mubarak affronted your dignity in any way? If that were true, it would be a scandal against reason itself!

Ahmed Amin: He has affronted my dignity in more ways than one.

Ibrahim Mustafa: Dr. Zaki has not affronted your dignity, sir.

Zaki Mubarak: You're all wading into matters I've never heard of before today. I never knew Ustadh Ahmed Amin was above criticism, nor did I imagine that challenging his views amounted to an assault on his personal sanctity! Do you truly believe, Ustadh, that I have wronged you?

Ahmed Amin: I have nothing to say to you, and I refuse to argue with you. You are free to publish whatever lies and slander you please.

Zaki Mubarak: Lies and slander? Is it dignified to speak such words in a gathering such as this?

Mansour Fahmy: Note well, Zaki, that you have wounded Ustadh Ahmed Amin, and that he has every right to declare his anger at you. The human soul is subject to satisfaction and anger, joy and sorrow, hope and despair — Ustadh Ahmed Amin is simply expressing, quite naturally, what lies within human nature.

Zaki Mubarak: And how would things stand had I taken the same liberties of expression that he has taken?

Ahmed Amin: Have you ever held back from anything? Your articles about me are living proof of the full measure of your manners!

Zaki Mubarak: And I stand entirely by what I said of you — I said nothing but truth and honesty, and I look forward to God's anger falling upon you, repaying you for the evil you have done in belittling the legacy of Arabic literature.

Taha Hussein: What's this story about?

Ahmed Amin: The story is that Zaki Mubarak says Taha Hussein is ignorant, and that Ahmed Amin is a fool!

Taha Hussein: What dreadful news!

Said Lutfi: I thought this was all in good fun. And where did Dr. Zaki publish these troubling words, anyway?!

Ahmed Amin: He published it in Al-Risala magazine — al-Zayyat's very own. Al-Risala, which I built with my own pen.

Zaki Mubarak: And al-Zayyat, whom you shaped with your own two hands!

Taha Hussein: I read the first article before my journey, and I asked Ustadh Abdo Azzam to keep the issue for me so I could read it upon my return; I shall read it these very days. If I find in it that I am ignorant and that Ahmed Amin is a fool, then your fall, Zaki, will be a fall into the muck!

Ahmed Amin: And what did Lutfi Pasha ever do, that Zaki Mubarak should treat him so unkindly?

Ibrahim Mustafa: I have read those articles several times...

Taha Hussein: In all seven canonical readings?

Ibrahim Mustafa: What I mean to say is that I read them carefully, and found in them not a single reference to His Excellency Lutfi Pasha.

Ali Abd al-Raziq: It hardly troubles Lutfi Pasha to be on the minds of critics and scholars.

Zaki Mubarak: And it's exactly for that reason that I attack him from time to time.

Said Lutfi: Now there's a curious way of showing devotion and loyalty!

Taha Hussein: Of course, of course — our friend Zaki Mubarak imagines that immortality belongs only to those he takes up in his articles and books, for good or ill. And I'll confess, he did lift a weight off my chest the day he said he never attacks me except in the belief that an attack means nothing more than "bonjour."

Ahmed Amin: Well, I want neither his bonjour nor his bonsoir!

Zaki Mubarak: But I won't leave you in peace, nor will I let up on you, until you stop doing harm to Arabic literature.

Ahmed Amin: And what business is Arabic literature of yours? What services have you ever rendered this literature you claim to guard as jealously as your own honour?

Zaki Mubarak: It's enough that I am one of Taha Hussein's students.

Taha Hussein: Mercy! Mercy! I swear, I'd be quite content for you to be counted among Taha Hussein's teachers instead!

Zaki Mubarak: My dear Doctor...

Taha Hussein: You'll be the death of me, calling me "dear Doctor" while you go about claiming I'm ignorant and Ahmed Amin's a fool.

Ali Abd al-Raziq: I've never in my life witnessed a more marvellous exchange — it deserves to be recorded.

Ibrahim Mustafa: On condition my name isn't mentioned in it.

Ali Abd al-Raziq: And what's to stop your name being mentioned in this exchange?

Ibrahim Mustafa: You don't know what's to stop it. The day this conversation is set down, no one will set it down but Zaki Mubarak — the very man who invented this art of evening tales and conversations.

Ali Abd al-Raziq: And are you afraid he'll embellish it at your expense?

Ibrahim Mustafa: I'm not afraid of embellishment, nor do I dread slander, for I'm quite capable of disproving falsehoods and refuting lies. If Zaki Mubarak simply slandered people, the matter would be lighter and easier to bear — but the trouble is, he excels, unfortunately, at capturing the truth.

Mansour Fahmy: And what's so dangerous about capturing the truth?

Ibrahim Mustafa: Very dangerous indeed. Let me explain the difficulty: Zaki Mubarak makes a point of portraying you at your very best — and the best state a believer can be caught in is the state of prayer. Do you know how he'd portray you at prayer? He'd portray you bowing, or prostrate! And would you be pleased to be portrayed in the act of bowing or prostration?

Tawfiq al-Hakim: Now that's a Parisian flight of fancy, Ustadh Ibrahim — it bears witness to the brilliance of your wit.

Ibrahim Mustafa: Not at all, Ustadh Tawfiq — that was simply a leap of the imagination this delightful conversation carried me to.

Ahmed Amin: I do hope you'll spare me these little jests — were it not for the dignity of this occasion, I would have left already.

Taha Hussein: I assure you Dr. Zaki never meant to harm you in what he wrote about you. Have you not seen how I myself bore with him for years, while he insisted on accusing me of ignorance?

Zaki Mubarak: I never accused you, dear Doctor, of ignorance pure and simple — God forbid! I only accused you of ignorance relative to Monsieur Bruno and Monsieur de Lacroix, both of whom served as deans of the Faculty of Letters in Paris.

Amin al-Khouli: Fair enough, you tough lad from Monufia — Dr. Taha has no objection to there being men in Paris more learned than he; after all, he graduated from the City of Light, and never tires of praising his

teachers there. But you accused Ustadh Ahmed Amin of intellectual vulgarity — how do you propose to get yourself out of that dreadful charge?

Zaki Mubarak: I never accused Ustadh Ahmed Amin of vulgarity pure and simple, only of vulgarity relative to Sheikh Kharboush.

Taha Hussein: And who is Sheikh Kharboush?

Zaki Mubarak: Sheikh Kharboush is such a towering scholar that Ustadh Ahmed Amin cannot even be compared to him.

Ali Abd al-Raziq: Didn't I tell you this exchange deserves to be recorded?

Abd al-Wahid Khallaf: This exchange is doing a fine job of soothing Ustadh Ahmed Amin's nerves — he's begun to smile. But what really matters is making use of this gathering to reform Dr. Zaki Mubarak's literary methods; he's the most capable of all our writers at stirring up literary storms, and I can't imagine how he came back from Iraq unscathed...

Tawfiq al-Hakim: Were you hoping he might meet his end there?

Taha Hussein: As one writer once put it, he'd have found rest — and given the rest of us some too.

Zaki Mubarak (reciting):

*You shall forever remain as you are, and I too
shall remain, for you, as everlasting as the mountains*

Ahmed Amin: What mountains, what eternity? Don't we have pens of our own that could snuff out yours with the smallest effort?

Abd al-Wahid Khallaf: Let me finish what I was saying. Zaki Mubarak is the most capable of all our writers at stirring up literary storms — but he never directs his energy toward anything useful.

Zaki Mubarak: And what would you suggest, sir?

Abd al-Wahid Khallaf: I'd suggest you return to your old ways, back when you wrote on artistic prose and Islamic mysticism, and turn your polemics and your duels against the ancients instead.

Taha Hussein: There's little hope of steering Dr. Zaki Mubarak toward anything useful or beneficial.

Zaki Mubarak: My dear Doctor...

Taha Hussein: You've floored me again with that phrase "my dear Doctor" — and I confess I'm at a loss over you. In company you're a perfectly charming man, but the moment you're left alone with your pen, you turn into an unruly devil.

Amin al-Khouli: Defend yourself, Zaki — I fear our tough lad from Monufia is about to be routed.

Zaki Mubarak: I have one thing to say, dear Doctor, and don't hold it against me for clinging to this phrase: I've sat in your lectures for several years, and I won't allow myself to attack you.

Taha Hussein: Didn't I tell you Zaki Mubarak was a...

Zaki Mubarak: I thank you for this kindness, dear Doctor — and I'll add that it was from you I learned the principles of injustice and high-handedness.

Abd al-Wahhab Azzam: That's it, Uncle Zaki — give it to him, give it all you've got!

Zaki Mubarak: Do you all remember the skirmish that broke out between Dr. Taha and Dr. Mansour in the pages of Al-Ahram, back in 1921?

Mansour Fahmy: What skirmish? Remind me, I've forgotten.

Zaki Mubarak: You had praised, dear Doctor, the style of al-Manfaluti — and our teacher Dr. Taha flew into a rage, and told you to call a camel a camel and a rabbit a rabbit, or words to that effect — meaning that al-Manfaluti was no writer and no man of letters at all.

Taha Hussein: And then?

Zaki Mubarak: And then along came the great Ustadh Dr. Taha Hussein himself, who had denied that al-Manfaluti was any writer or man of letters, only to turn around and admit that Ustadh Ahmed Amin was indeed a writer and a man of letters, and to allow his style to be taught to first-year students at the Faculty of Letters!

Taha Hussein: What on earth have you been smoking?

Zaki Mubarak: I've never touched hashish in my life — but I assure you, Ahmed Amin's style really is taught at the Faculty of Letters.

Taha Hussein: Impossible.

Ahmed Amin: The Faculty teaches the styles of all contemporary writers.

Zaki Mubarak: And you're a writer, with a style of your own?

Mansour Fahmy: Careful, Zaki, not to overstep the bounds of polite address.

Ahmed Amin: If only you'd believe me when I say that Zaki Mubarak doesn't criticize a scholar the way one scholar criticizes another — he criticizes him the way a wrestler grapples with a scholar.

Zaki Mubarak: And are you a scholar, Ustadh? Is scholarship, too, measured out by the bushel?

Ahmed Amin: All the scholarship belongs to you, apparently — the rest of us are mere beginning students!

Ali Abd al-Raziq: This exchange doesn't deserve to be recorded after all!

Abd al-Hamid al-Abbadi: Whatever the case, it's a slice of history!

Tawfiq al-Hakim: I swear, I'm deeply saddened by what we've come to; I had always hoped there might be great friendships among our men of letters, of the kind one finds among the great writers of Paris, London, and Berlin.

Abd al-Wahhab Azzam: Like the one we've just witnessed between Zaki Mubarak and Ahmed Amin!

Taha Hussein: My mind simply refuses to accept that criticism ruins friendship between friends.

Shafiq Ghorbal: I believe Dr. Zaki is a good-hearted man at bottom. I've read his articles about Ustadh Ahmed Amin with real pleasure, and gained a great deal of literary benefit from them. Had he only spared his pen certain expressions that ran toward mockery of Ustadh Ahmed Amin, no one could have levelled the slightest blame against him.

Tawfiq al-Hakim: And these articles have another merit besides their literary benefit — they made me so sick of our literary atmosphere here that they made spending the summer in Europe seem attractive, and I didn't come back until I thought it was all over. Then my dismay was great indeed when I found Zaki Mubarak still going back and forth, elaborating on Ahmed Amin's crimes. Had it not been for the war, I would have turned right back the way I came. Wherever does Zaki Mubarak find all this endless talk?

Shafiq Ghorbal: The one responsible for all this trouble is Ustadh Ahmed Amin himself.

Ahmed Amin: I'm responsible?

Shafiq Ghorbal: Absolutely you're responsible — you spent the whole summer pursuing your research, and handed Dr. Zaki Mubarak the perfect opening. Whoever feeds the fire has no right to complain that it burns.

Taha Hussein: Am I to understand from this that our literary world has actually come alive this summer?

Zaki Mubarak: Suffice it to say, dear Doctor, that Ustadh Ahmed Amin moved his entire library to Alexandria this summer, just to have all his references at hand while answering me.

Ahmed Amin: I answered you? And did you ever say anything worth answering?

Zaki Mubarak: God alone knows how thoroughly you occupied your heart and mind, and how I forced you to go back and comb through works of literature and treatises of jurisprudence. Can you honestly claim, Ustadh, not to know my standing in the world of letters?

Ahmed Amin: Your articles attacking me have only put readers off your scholarship and your writing.

Shafiq Ghorbal: I heard the opposite. I heard that Dr. Zaki Mubarak's articles attacking Ustadh Ahmed Amin showed exceptional learning and profound thought, and I heard some say they never appreciated Zaki Mubarak's true worth until these very articles.

Mansour Fahmy: And that explains something about the public mind — the crowd knows Zaki Mubarak the critic, but not Zaki Mubarak the

author, because he criticizes in a fury and composes in calm.

Taha Hussein: Zaki Mubarak stages a revolution in everything he does, even in his scholarly writing — but his revolution in his books never catches the public eye, because it mostly concerns figures of the past, and attacking figures of the past only stirs people's attention when it touches on matters of doctrine, near or far — as happened the day his book *On Pre-Islamic Poetry* appeared.

Zaki Mubarak: And that's precisely why, dear Doctor, you took care to sharpen a few choice words — to draw attention to that precious book of yours!

Taha Hussein: And so then what, Dr. Zaki?

Zaki Mubarak: Neither "so then" nor "so before" — but I would like to know how it is that plain speaking can be lawful at one moment and forbidden the next? And how is it that what is permitted to you, dear Doctor, is forbidden to everyone else?

Taha Hussein: It seems you'd like to enjoy complete freedom in your intellectual life — and it seems, unfortunately, that you've taken no lesson from what the free thinkers of this country have suffered. What you envy me for is yours to claim whenever you please. I only hope the day is far off when you turn back from your excess and your recklessness — the day you despair of people's fairness, as I myself have despaired of it.

Mansour Fahmy: But what justifies touching on matters that concern people's beliefs?

Taha Hussein: Ask yourself that, Mansour — you have your own history with matters of belief.

Mansour Fahmy: That was in the days of my youth.

Taha Hussein: And what I did, I did in the days of my youth too, though barely ten years have passed since. And regret still stings my heart whenever I remember that I no longer have it in me to provoke the crowds again. Do we ever provoke the crowds except by grace of whatever revolt and defiance still burns in our blood?

Abd al-Wahid Khallaf: Does that mean Dr. Zaki Mubarak provokes the crowd of writers because he is still in the full flush of youth?

Taha Hussein: What I know is that Zaki Mubarak has, by virtue of age at least, passed into the ranks of the middle-aged — for I myself witnessed his troublemaking in Ustadh Ali Abd al-Raziq's classes at al-Azhar, back in 1912.

Zaki Mubarak: And I myself witnessed your troublemaking, dear Doctor, in Sheikh Muhammad al-Mahdi's classes at the Egyptian University, back in 1913.

Ahmed Amin: And despite his advanced age, Zaki Mubarak still goes on and on about romance and flirtation as though he were twenty years old.

Shafiq Ghorbal: That little joke shows Ustadh Ahmed Amin's mood has cleared and sweetened.

Taha Hussein: Then may we hope Zaki Mubarak will cease his hostilities now that the air has cleared between you?

Zaki Mubarak: Will it truly be a genuine reconciliation?

Ahmed Amin: We shall never truly reconcile, after all that has happened.

Zaki Mubarak: It seems you actually enjoy being attacked — so I shall disappoint you, and hold my tongue after just three or four more articles... Good evening, dear Doctor, and praise be to God who has brought you back to us safe and sound.

(Heliopolis)

Zaki Mubarak