

The Fugitive Conscience

Al-Risala, 7 May 1934

My friend was not as simple-souled or as coarse-hearted in his outer manner as that French officer whom I think you have seen in one of the cinemas, conspiring with his companions to overturn the order in France and restore the throne to Napoleon's son. One day, while walking along one of the pavements of Paris, the officer came across a companion of his from the Emperor's army. A long time had passed between them, and the encounter fell pleasantly on both men; they spoke of the army and the Emperor, they spoke of yesterday and tomorrow, and were not loath to speak ill of their own day and say much against it. Then the two friends went on, and the officer was telling his companion of their mutual friends and what they were conspiring toward, when the conversation continued to carry them from topic to topic until the officer learnt that his friend had not remained loyal to the Emperor's cause, but had preferred the ease of life and entered the King's service. There and then the officer was unable to reproach his friend, or upbraid him, or argue with him about anything; he did no more than extinguish the lamp so as not to see the face of this treacherous friend. And the man understood what his friend wished to say and withdrew from him in shame and regret.

My friend was not as simple-souled or as coarse-hearted in his outer manner as this French officer. He was rather a man of refined sensibility—not in his material life, but especially in his inner life. He was very refined of mind: he did not content himself with the surface of things nor rest satisfied with their realities, but sought something loftier than surfaces and deeper than realities, as though it were the core and essence of everything. And when he arrived at this essence and that core he was still not satisfied, but chose from among them what was purest, most elevated, most fully suited to the distinguished mind, the refined taste, the cultivated feeling, and the proud and lofty soul. My friend was also a man of very keen sensory apprehension, yet he held the senses in the most profound contempt: he placed them in their natural station, neither magnifying them nor being excessive in his attention to them, expecting of them nothing more than is expected of an instrument that is wanted only to perform the work for which it was made. He wanted from his senses nothing more than that they should convey to him a picture of the outward life; and when they conveyed it, he occupied himself with it, verifying and scrutinising, refining and purifying, reserving for himself

the essence of whatever the verifying, scrutinising, refining, and purifying yielded; and with this he nourished his mind and his heart and his feeling. He reflected upon it long, and extracted from it the utmost it could yield of pleasure and pain, of lesson and grandeur, of joy and sorrow.

My friend, by virtue of this particular temperament, was extremely complicated, a weariness to himself and to all his companions and friends alike; and he would often ask himself what it was he wanted and find no answer to this question. And his friends would ask him what he wanted and find no answer to this question either. So they accepted him with all his faults, and accepted him with all the difficulty and complexity of his company. His life and his friends' lives had been easy, gentle, and straight, proceeding on a course with no crookedness or winding in it, as the lives of all people are in certain periods of security and calm and quiet. He was content with his friends and they were content with him. And the difficulties and problems of life that befell him and them only served to reveal these things to one another, binding his friends to him and binding him to his friends.

But the quiet of life and its ease, the steady flow of security and the evenness of paths for those who walk them, are not ordained things, fated for people or fated against them, as though they had extracted from time and circumstance a promise that these things would remain. They are, rather, possibilities: available at some times and withheld at others. Available, and people are happy; withheld, and people suffer. Available, and some people remain strangers to one another, and some people love one another, and people are reassured of one another; for the circumstances of life do not compel them to examine one another too closely, nor to put one another too severely to the test. Then withheld, and people come to know one another; and no sooner do they know one another than they recoil from one another and turn their backs on one another. Suspicion takes the place of certainty among them, caution takes the place of reassurance, concealment takes the place of openness, hatred takes the place of love; and they repent of their old ignorance, and grieve for their past reassurance, and wish that God might restore to them those sweet days when they took their pleasure in the delights of unknowing, the sweetness of heedlessness, and the bliss of trust; and spare them from these days in which they suffer the pain of knowing, the bitterness of insight, and the misery of doubt.

My friend had thrown open all the doors of his soul, wide upon their hinges, to receive everything from everything and from every person; and then to rejoice in this purifying and refining, in this scrutiny and verification, and in the choosing of the finest fruits from all the good and the poor that he had gathered. But when the days turned harsh, he closed none of the doors of his soul; instead he looked, and saw that souls were closing themselves against him one by one, and their doors were shutting against him one by one. What he could gather in the way of impressions grew less and less, more and more rare, until it had come to be almost nothing. And what remained of those few souls that had held firm against trials, that had resisted misfortunes and refused to bend their resolution before events, had begun to be touched, from time to time, by a very fine colour of shyness, then of excess of shyness, then of anxious solicitude, then of excess of anxious solicitude. Then the colour grew dense and more dense, layer upon layer was added to layer, until it became wariness and caution; until it changed into a thick, heavy veil through which no soul could reach another, no heart could arrive at another, no conscience could speak to another.

And when my friend met his companions, he met from them nothing but faces; when he shook hands with his companions, he shook nothing from them but hands; when he spoke with his companions, there was between them nothing but the movements of tongues in mouths, the issuing of words from lips, the arrival of sounds at ears, then their stopping before these doors that had been shut fast and these curtains that had been drawn close. And yet he too had been no less assiduous than his companions and friends in shutting the doors of his own soul and casting veils and curtains between himself and them; for what he had seen in them had wounded him just as what they had seen in him had wounded them. And so this shyness that was in them had begun to compound itself in his soul as it compounded itself in theirs, until it became anxious solicitude, then doubt, then wariness and caution. Yet my friend's shyness was not the same as his friends' shyness: they were shy before him, while he was shy on their behalf; they were anxiously apprehensive of him, while he was anxiously apprehensive for them; they were guarded from him, while he was guarded on their account. But it was shyness, and anxious solicitude, and guardedness all the same. It was the shutting of doors and the drawing of curtains and veils all the same. It was the severing of ties and the corruption of bonds all the same. It was isolation among people who had been unable to hold themselves apart from one another; separation among people who had been unable to

enjoy being apart; dissemblance among people who had been incapable of bearing dissemblance. It was this piercing pain that arises from parting while people are gathered together, from distance while people are near, from estrangement while people are in communication. It was the torment that people endure when they speak with their tongues and not their hearts, when they hear with their ears and not their souls, when their hands clasp one another while vast distances open between their consciences and intentions—except for those among them who had grown accustomed to this life and been reassured by it, and found in it something like what they had found in that other life of pleasure, ease, and contentment; for they had parted with friends and found other friends in their place, had grown distant from loved ones and settled comfortably among other loved ones.

At that point my friend looked at himself, and found he had become one of the instruments, setting out with the day and returning with the night, meeting people and speaking to them and hearing them without understanding what issued from him or tasting what issued from them in the way of talk. An instrument coming and going, receiving impressions from other instruments like itself and making impressions upon other instruments like itself—but they were outward, mechanical impressions with no substance to them and no pleasure in them, and no trace in their manifestations of the strong, reasoning, thinking life; nothing but an instrument playing its role, no more and no less, working with other instruments playing their role, no more and no less.

My friend still had a remnant of strength in his soul, a surplus of life in his conscience, a trace of resolve in his will, and a little of that intellectual refinement he had enjoyed in the days when people were truly people and life was truly life. And what his affairs and his friends' affairs had come to—this state in which a man denies himself and believes only in others—he found this the gravest of things, and was oppressed by it, and resolved to withdraw from this environment in which he could not be other than a subjugated instrument. And yet he withdrew from it and did not withdraw from it: he settled in his house and lived among his family, sought no one out and gave no thought to meeting anyone; and he imagined that this seclusion would suffice him and protect him and restore his soul to him, innocent of hypocrisy and preserved from corruption. But it was not long before he became certain he had accomplished nothing; for he withdrew from people yet people did not withdraw from him; he turned his face from them yet they came

toward him; he held back from them yet they sought him out; he withheld from them his shyness on their behalf and his anxious solicitude for them, yet they brought to him their shyness before him and their apprehension of him, and went to excess in this, thinking either that they were deceiving him about their own selves, or that they were deceiving themselves about themselves.

When my friend despaired of any benefit from this seclusion, and became certain that there was no hope for him of winning his soul pure, his heart clean, and his conscience alive, except by leaving the whole environment behind and emigrating from one land to another, quitting one home for another, he kept this to himself and showed to us, his circle of dissembling friends, the same surface appearance he had always shown: the pleasant greeting and the gentle conviviality when we visited him and sat with him.

Then one day I called on him to spend an hour of leisure with him—and how many hours of leisure there are in our lives, we Egyptians—and I did not find him. I asked where he might be, and was given no direction. I asked when he might return, and was told nothing. I went back sorrowful, not because I had not found him, but because I had not laid upon him the weight of the tedium and vexation and emptiness I was carrying; and because I had not conveyed to him that I preferred him with my love and believed he preferred me with his. Because I had not offered him some portion of this dissemblance that we offer to one another every day, nor received from him some portion of this dissemblance that we receive from one another every day. I returned sorrowful because the instrument had not performed some part of what it was supposed to perform of its acting.

I returned to my friend and sought him out but did not find him; our mutual friends began to seek him out and did not find him; every one of them felt what I had felt, every one of them spoke to himself what I had spoken to myself of sorrow and disappointment; and a few of them speak to people what I am now speaking to you, dear reader.

Then the weeks and months passed, and this morning I received from him these lines that moved me to write this piece. I think I shall answer him only by sending him this issue of Al-Risala, for I now know his address. He wrote to me saying:

“I am writing to you, my friend, from a distant country to which I have fled with my soul and my conscience from a country in which

consciences and souls are corrupted; and I have preferred to live in it alone with myself rather than live among you in the life of instruments and not the life of human beings. I had thought I had parted from you never to return, and journeyed from you never to come back; that I had wearied of your life with a weariness that knows no bounds, and loathed it with a loathing whose depth I cannot fathom, and lost the strength to bear even the lightest of its burdens. And I confess that I have found in this emigration a genuine and abundant happiness; I have explored myself in it and rejoiced in this discovery; I have grown intimate in it with my conscience and delighted in this intimacy. Yet I had not remained in this country a month or two before I felt that my own self was not enough for me, and before I grew weary of prolonged gazing at the mirror; and I began to think of my friends and then recoiled from their very memory, and fled from them to books at one moment, and to the scenes of this splendid nature at another. I am still at ease, my friend, in this refuge I have come to and taken hold of. But look! Here I am writing to you; and I wrote to you only because I thought of you; and I thought of you only because my soul was yearning toward conversation with you. So that life of mine has refused to do anything but follow me into my emigration and force its way into this refuge I retreated to. All I hope is that it will not overpower me within myself, nor drive me out of my refuge, but will content itself with visiting me and coming by me from time to time. Write to me, and at length; for it seems that the life that rises purely above all the imperfections we dislike is something inaccessible. As for me, I have tried the weariness of life in Egypt and flight from it; and I pledge to you, my friends, that your companion will return to you when summer has ended. And who knows—perhaps life will have returned to some measure of security and ease and quiet; perhaps the doors will have swung open and the veils and curtains been lifted; and we shall have no need among ourselves for the manufacture of dissemblance, nor for the manufacture of courtesy; and we shall feel no shyness before one another, nor on one another's behalf."