

Moments

Al-Risala, 12 February 1934

Do you know these brief, sudden moments that come upon you from where you could never have expected them, as though they had lain in wait in some fold of time, until, when you drew near their hiding place, they sprang out upon you with all the force and sharpness that filled them, and with all the power they hold to stir within you a broad, deep sorrow, or a wide, smiling hope? They halt you upon your path through time, and after a brief pause compel you to return to the distant or the recent past, summoning up what events it held and feeling what memory it has left within you; or they force you to leap a great leap into the days to come, so that you find yourself building castles, and fashioning out of imagination sweet dreams that make life dear to you, and fill your heart with forgiveness for whatever ills it has done you.

Do you know these brief, sudden, fertile moments, which you could never have imagined, at any time, would come to you, or that you would stumble upon them — yet you went out one day from your house, pursuing what people pursue of life's earnest business and its play, and tasting what people taste in their pursuit of life's sweetness and bitterness, when one of these moments fell upon you as a wall falls upon a stranger who happens to pass by it just as it leans toward collapse; or it appeared to you and then stood before you, as some precious thing appears to certain passers-by and then stands within their reach when they arrive at it, and there they stand before it, seized first by bewilderment, then overwhelmed by delight? Do you know these brief, sudden moments that the unseen conceals within itself, hiding from you their first stirrings and their first signs, then springs them upon you unawares — as when a man, known to you or unknown, meets you and casts before you some piece of news he sees no importance in, and yet you have scarcely heard it before it works within your soul the deepest and most powerful of effects, the most far-reaching and most compelling toward sorrow and dejection, or toward joy and rapture?

You reckon these moments, when you meet them or they meet you, to be brief, because you number them in minutes and seconds; yet they are not brief at all, for they carry, within their small and narrow vessel, such a measure of feeling and passion, of hope and memory, of pleasure and pain, as many an hour, indeed many a day, would find too much to

hold. You reckon these moments sudden, because they came upon you, or you came upon them, unlooked-for, with no preparation on their part or on yours; yet they are not sudden at all, for other powers, neither yours nor theirs, have laboured since ages long past to prepare you for them and prepare them for you, to drive you toward them and drive them toward you, until you two met — a meeting sudden in outward appearance, but in true reality a decreed dispensation and an appointed fate. And each of you, it turns out, was fashioned for the other, and destined for the other with a true destining.

These moments — at once brief and vast, sudden and long-ordained — do not come to all people, nor do they come to people at every time; and had I known some means of discerning how they come to people, and when they come to them, and to whom among them they come, I should be among the greatest of discoverers and inventors. And how should a mere man come to lay bare the secret of fate and tear away the veils of the unseen?! And I should, moreover, be a benefactor to a great many people, for I would teach them how to guard against much evil, and much stinging pain and soul-wearying grief; and yet I should also do a great many people harm, for I would teach them how to lose pleasures such as people scarcely ever attain the like of, and how knowledge bars them from certain kinds of happiness that only the ignorant may enjoy. And so I should take the greatest care to remain ignorant of this knowledge, and to close myself off, on every side, from these laws — for I would not exchange these moments, brief yet vast, sudden yet long-ordained, for a great many portions of time, however long they stretch, however short they run, however full or however empty they may be. And what searing, festering sorrow resembles, in its burning, stinging pleasure, and in its dark, sombre happiness, this sorrow which one of these moments once bore to me, on a night among nights, and set down within my heart, heavy, rough, and hard to bear — yet sweet withal, for all that; and I, for all that, loved it and grew fond of it. And I, for all that, gave thanks for this brief, sudden moment that bore it to me, until, when it had reached the depths of my soul, it laid it down there, calm and at rest until the very end of time, and came bearing it slowly and heavily, as a great stone is set down in some place, without violence, without weariness, without fatigue.

I was with a company of friends, watching a performance and listening to music and song at the Opera; we had given ourselves wholly to what we watched and heard, and had left all the burdens and weights

of life together in that carriage which waited for us at the door, which had kept for each of us whatever deposit he had entrusted to it, to return to us whenever we came back to it. And those deposits of ours, entrusted to the carriage, and set aside before we entered the Opera, were nothing but our daily lives, with all their hardship and ease, their affection and rancour, their despair and hope, their pain and pleasure, their vigour and languor. We set all this aside, and drew our souls out of it for a while, as swords are drawn from their sheaths, and freed ourselves, with hearts and souls pure, clear, and polished like a mirror, holding them up before the performers, that whatever manifestations of artistic beauty they might create, in acting and in song, might be reflected within them. And we felt nothing but what we watched and heard, and thought of nothing but what we watched and heard; and when the performance paused, and we scattered through the halls of the house, or remained in our places, we spoke of nothing but what we had watched and heard, describing it and delighting in it, and of nothing but what we would watch and hear, anticipating it and foretelling what pleasure and delight it would bring us. And ought people to enter the houses of art in any other way than this — having freed themselves for art from everything, and from the memory of everything, and given themselves wholly to art, sharing their souls with nothing else at all?

And there I was, sitting in one part of the house with my friends, speaking of what had passed on the stage, and anticipating what was to come, when a voice drew my friends, and drew me, out of what we were in... a voice I had not heard for years, though I had once heard it every day; a voice from which the reaches of time and place had grown so distant from my hearing that every thread between it and me had been severed, until I had very nearly forgotten its tones, and had come to think of it only in a far-off, remote sort of way, whenever others who spoke of it brought it up to me. Then this voice drew near, and drew nearer still; then a hand was extended, and my hand extended toward it; then there was a handshake, then a greeting, then a request for leave to sit, and leave was granted; then there was a silence from the owner of the voice, and a silence from the one the voice had reached, which did not last long, and would not have been easy to notice, and yet, for all that, was long and heavy. Then there was a brief conversation about matters neither useful nor meaningful, nor indicative of anything; then the drinking of coffee and the lighting of a cigarette, then the farewell greeting, then the parting.

I do not know whether my friends still tasted the pleasure of the performance after that, or were kept from it; but as for myself, I know that I tasted nothing more of the performance for the rest of that night — the sounds reached my ear, but went no further, and stopped short of my soul, for my thoughts were on other things than the performance, and I had been utterly turned away from the singing and the art. Why did this voice draw near to me, when it had grown so distant, and gone so far into distance? Why was this hand extended to me, when it had been withdrawn from me so completely? Why did conversation pass between the owner of this voice and hand and myself, when all talk between him and me had long since ceased — indeed, when all connection between him and me had been severed, save what we were forced into when some gathering brought us together, or when we happened to meet without appointment or expectation, unable even then to offer one another the courtesy of turning politely away, as befits the estrangement between us? Why did this voice draw near to me? Why was this hand extended to me? Why did this conversation pass between us?

Shyness shimmered within this voice as it drew near to me, seized and sorrowful; shyness trembled within this hand as it shook mine, hesitant and somewhat quivering; shyness filled this conversation, and forced it to empty itself of all meaning or purpose. And yet, God is my witness, I never once doubted that this voice had drawn near to me in sincerity, that this hand had reached toward me in sincerity, and that this conversation had passed between us free of all pretence.

Alas for mankind! Human frailty alone weighs their souls down with heavy sorrows. Alas for mankind! The fleeting circumstances of life, which draw them toward some quick good and frighten them away from some quick harm, weigh their souls down with heavy sorrows. Alas for mankind! Their bodies overwhelm their souls, their passions overwhelm their reason, and their own interests make them forget the rights of friendship and of the friend. Alas for mankind! Awe of power, desire for its favour, and eagerness to remain close to it, spoil for them pure and unmixed pleasures of life that ought never to be spoiled. Alas for mankind! For all this, they yet possess souls not stamped for evil, nor barred from good; and these souls, weak enough to become entangled in what does not become them, snatch at chances of strength and goodness by stealth, seize them by surprise, and take their pleasure in some small, meagre portion of them, in a brief, sudden moment they never expected, and for which no effort had been contrived — a moment that simply

presented itself and was seized, as game presents itself and, once the chance allows, is taken. Alas for mankind! Did they but know that the interests of life, its passing shows and its aims, and all it holds of desire and awe, of standing and prestige, do not together outweigh one brief, sudden moment in which affection runs clear, in which counsel is given in sincerity, and in which friend gives himself wholly to friend — they would change a great deal of their lives and their conduct.

This brief, sudden moment came upon me on one of the nights at the Opera; and how often these brief, sudden moments come upon so many people in these dark days! O God, lift from mankind Your wrath and Your anger; O God, grant mankind a life in which no friend fears to meet his friend, in which no friend must steal his meeting with his friend, in which no friend severs the bonds of affection and love with his friend, for no reason but that he fears the power's displeasure, or hopes for the power's favour.