

A Debate Between Sea and River

Kawkab al-Sharq, 1933

The river began its descent from the mountain heights, gathering its water from streams and springs, from piled snows and scattered lakes, and went on tumbling from slope to slope, from cataract to cataract, from valley to valley, until, after a long journey and no small effort, it reached a vast and mighty sea, into which it began to pour and pour, and empty and empty itself.

Then, having drawn near until it hung suspended, close as two bow-lengths or nearer, it said: "O brimming, boundless deep! Good morrow to you, and may you prosper, and may you long enjoy health and well-being, and a life of ease and contentment."

"How I should delight in you, O Sea, were it not that your water is bitter and briny, that you are forever in a fury of rage, trembling and convulsion, that you are much given to roaring and shrieking, and that you never stir at all unless the winds drive you to it. Are you not that noble offspring of whom al-Aqqad once wrote:

*How I should delight in the sea, in its depth and its breadth—
were it only made of sugar, or were it made of honey.*

"But since you are devoid of both sugar and honey, I find you of no use in this world, and no intercessor in the next."

Said the narrator: "No sooner had the sea heard this speech than fury seized it, and it began to foam and froth, and waves like mountains surged up from its surface and rushed upon the river, slapping it, then returning to strike it again."

And it said to the river: "Woe to you, ill-mannered wretch, who knows not his own worth, nor grasps a single thing of what exists in this world! You are nothing but a paltry, puny channel, possessed of length but neither breadth nor depth, which I could obliterate at will, and wipe from existence entirely—by my life, I am fit to swallow you whole, you and every river besides, were you and your rabble not too contemptible for me to waste many words on you, or squander my time in disputing with you."

The river said: "Gently now, old fellow! It would become you better to calm your excess and lower your pride—for since when have the scales of things gone so awry that merit belongs to sheer bulk and mass?

"What good is your immense size, your long and broad expanse, when your water is salty, your face is scowling, and your conduct is unsound? Look at me! How sweet is my water, clear as living spring-water; how lovely its murmur at the close of day; how splendid the beautiful prospect of its course! All people draw from my watering-places—how often have I given drink to the thirsty and satisfied the hungry! And who is it that pairs saltiness with sweetness, or prefers bitterness to sweetness? Confess, then, your own deficiency and impotence, and spare me your carping and your slander."

Said the narrator: at that, the sea surged and roared, rose up and swelled with pride, crossed one leg over the other, and set about twisting his moustache with his left hand, gesturing menacingly with his right, and said to the river: "O baseborn wretch of little manners, do you not know that it is I who supply you with water, when vapour rises from my surface, and the winds bear it off as cloud, and cast it down as rain, which then flows as brooks and rivers as paltry as yourself? What an ingrate you are, denying the favour, disowning the blessing! By God, should I withhold from you the water and the rain, your throat, wretch that you are, would run dry, your very form would be disfigured, your landmarks effaced, your channels parched—but fortunately for you and your kind, I am a broad-hearted man, and pay no heed to petty creatures like you, nor to petty matters. So leave me be, contemptible thing, for I am occupied with better things than disputing with your like."

The river answered him, engaging him in debate, but with a touch of mockery and biting irony, in the manner of Bernard Shaw and Taha Hussein, saying: "Indeed, upon my life, you are truly occupied—occupied a great deal with me, and with those like me! And were it not that I flow through the land of Egypt, a land of comic things, and that I have grown so accustomed to seeing and hearing comic things that they no longer amuse me at all, I should have burst out laughing until the very pebbles and sand of my bed showed through. So you are occupied elsewhere than with us, O Sea—most greatly occupied indeed! But tell me, by your father, if you have one: what is it that occupies you? Is it anything at all besides wrecking and destroying, drowning and exhausting? Your greatest amusement is to seize upon some poor ship, unleash your waves upon it, toss it this way and that, and, once you have thoroughly

tormented its passengers, set about swallowing them and devouring them whole—for you harbour a hunger that knows no cure, and a thirst for blood that knows no quenching, and a greed and gluttony unmatched even by beasts of prey, and a belly which I grant you is vast and spacious, but filled with ill-gotten gain and forbidden wealth. What pride can you take in this, if you possessed even as much understanding as you possess bulk?

“As for your claim to be the source that supplies us rivers with our water—that is the talk of one too short-sighted to see beyond his own nose. Had you but worn spectacles to see matters as they truly are, you would have realised that the water which rises as vapour and turns to cloud is stirred up by nothing but the sun’s own heat, which lifts it to the sky in spite of you; and had the matter been left to you alone, we should never have won from you so much as a single drop. In any case, it is running water we return to you, not vapour on the wing; and though the water of the rivers, plentiful as it is, cannot suffice—alas!—to lend you sweetness and pleasantness, you shall remain, until the end of time, gall and wormwood, salt and brine.”

At this, the sea could no longer bear what it took to be the impudence and insolence of a paltry, puny river, and so it sent its tide against the river, obliterating it and hiding its landmarks for a time. Woe, then, to the weak and the wretched, at the hands of the strong who lie in wait!

Said the narrator: an inspector from the Egyptian Ministry of Education happened to be near the scene of this debate, and was so delighted by what he heard that he swore an oath to make it the subject for the Arabic composition paper in the Primary Certificate Examination.