

The Seriousness of Winter

Al-Risala, 15 January 1934

It is a serious matter of winter that we should congratulate al-Zayyat on two feast-days whose dawn breaks upon him as a single dawn — this very day on which *Al-Risala* appears before its readers — and whose sun rises upon him as a single sun, the sun of a Monday. And in them he greets two smiles than which, I know, nothing in life is dearer to him, nothing strikes a deeper chord within him, nothing paints a fairer image in his heart, nothing more powerfully revives his hope, summons his joy, or stirs his delight; one of these smiles is his alone, or nearly his alone — God forgive me — rather, it is shared between himself and the other half of his soul, his partner in life; it is the smile of his son, Raja. The other is shared between himself and his friends and loved ones, his rivals and his adversaries, throughout all of Egypt, throughout the whole Arab East, and in every corner of the earth where Arabic is read and Arabic letters are savored; it is the smile of his daughter, *Al-Risala*.

For it was on a day like this one, a year ago, that al-Zayyat was blessed with these two dear newborns: he rejoiced in the first, for his own sake and his family's, and rejoiced in the second, for his own sake and his nation's; and he spent the whole year devoted to raising Raja and cultivating *Al-Risala*, reserving the labor of his mind for the one, and setting apart the overflow of his heart for the other. And he reaps from each, as he reaps from the other, those sweet-bitter fruits, that delicious pain, which the living reap from loving the living, from caring for them, and from turning wholly toward them and away from all else.

Raja smiles at life, and al-Zayyat's heart smiles and his soul rejoices; *Al-Risala* smiles at life, and al-Zayyat's mind smiles and his conscience rejoices. Life's pains beset Raja, and al-Zayyat's heart grows heavy, his nights grow sleepless, his days grow bitter, and life darkens before his eyes. Difficulties beset *Al-Risala*, and al-Zayyat's mind grows wretched, his conscience grows troubled, the earth grows too narrow for him and he too narrow for the earth; he finds no peace, no rest, no savor in living, unless he greets the day at home with Raja's smile, and greets the day outside his home with *Al-Risala*'s smile.

Is it not a serious matter that we should congratulate our friend when the year has turned full circle and Monday has come round again, and there is Raja, greeting life with a smile, delighted with it, drawing

from it that sweet, beautiful, untroubled fortune, pure of every taint, which is granted only to children? — that same fortune once granted to all of us, in some time now past, and then erased from our souls, our hearts, and our memories by these passing days and the nights that follow them; so that we no longer remember it, no longer value it, but only grieve for it, and wish we could achieve the impossible: to recapture the happiness of its fresh innocence, while yet holding on to that very source of the pain and sorrow, the gloom and misery, we so dislike — namely, the mind and the conscience?

Is it not a serious matter that we should congratulate al-Zayyat when the year has turned and Monday has come round again, and there is Al-Risala, greeting life with confidence in her readers' devotion and support, and in their eagerness to greet her, week after week, strong and vigorous, still pressing forward in her portrayal of the literary life of the East, and the literary hopes of the East, with all their earnestness and jest, their strength and weakness, their hope and despair, their light and darkness, their vigor and languor. Indeed, it is the most serious matter of all that we should congratulate our friend on this day, happy alike for his heart and his mind, and that we should wish for our friend that he may turn his back on year after year to come, and greet this day, each time the heavens complete their circuit, still bearing these two smiles that fill his heart, his mind, and his conscience with joy and calm — readiness to do his duty, and readiness to shoulder the burdens of life.

And it is a serious matter of winter, too, that we should call to mind the people's amusements amid winter's pleasures — and how many are winter's pleasures, how sweet they are, how varied and how diverse, how well certain of them sit with our hearts, how beautifully certain of them touch our souls, and how little inclination we have to seek out the best of them and turn toward their finer delights. As for the cinemas, they are, thank God, well attended every night of the week and every day of it; numerous, yet for all that crowded with those who frequent them, packed to capacity, offering their patrons a great deal of nonsense and precious little of any worthwhile value — and with this the patrons are content, and this is what they seek, for they desire nothing more than this slight, fleeting pleasure that distracts them, for an hour of night or an hour of day, from the cares and burdens of life.

As for the theaters, the matter is quite different there; among them the Arabic theater, which repeats what it has already begun and begins again what it has already repeated, accompanying life without ever truly

living it, greeting the days and nights only because the days and nights pass over it and engulf it, as they pass over and engulf everything else. It brings nothing new, invents nothing fresh; and yet people flock to these theaters in listlessness and apathy, because they have grown used to frequenting them as they have grown used to frequenting the clubs and cafés — spending in them empty hours of an empty life, then returning home with empty souls, empty hearts, and full stomachs, filled, God alone knows, with what manner of food and drink. And you may well ask yourself, ask others, ask the writers, ask the critics, for some fresh tale among the tales of the stage, some wondrous sign among the signs of art, with which we might have greeted this winter season — and you will win nothing for your trouble but a shake of the head, a shrug of the shoulders, and a smile in which there is mockery, and sorrow too, and despair of life, and contempt for life, and a turning away from whatever might give life worth or make it fit for thought and consideration.

Among them, too, is the Royal Opera House, which sleeps nine months of the year and wakes for three; it sleeps because it lies in a country that loves its sleep, and it wakes because a company of foreigners rouses it each time autumn ends and winter draws near. And they rouse it because they are invited to, and courted into it: the State invites them, not wishing it to be thought that we sleep the whole year through, nor wishing tourists who visit us to find nothing to entertain them and relieve them of the day's fatigue. And our foreign guests, too, urge it on — guests who never sleep, neither in summer nor in winter; they are awake in their own countries when summer comes, and awake in ours when winter comes. They amuse themselves in their own countries at their own expense when summer comes, and they amuse themselves in our country at our expense when winter comes — and the strange thing is that we entertain them, yet do not join in their amusement. The rights of hospitality, at the very least, would oblige us to share with them in whatever entertainment we offer them; but count for me, if you will, the tarbooshes that were at the Opera last Monday, and you will not reach twenty. As for the turbans — what business have they with the Opera? How could one imagine them ever finding their way to that house?!