

# Ingratitude . . .

*Al-Wadi, 8 July 1934*

Most of the wrongs committed and charged to foreigners' account in Egypt are, in truth, laid at foreigners' door by Egyptians themselves — simply because foreigners have no real knowledge of how things stand in Egypt. Whatever the Egyptian Ministry does is taken, in their eyes, for an Egyptian act: the good in it, if there is any, gets credited to Egypt; but the bad — and there is so much more of that — falls on this unfortunate Egyptian people. And why wouldn't foreigners, in Europe and beyond, hold the Egyptian nation responsible for the Ministry's doings, and lay its burdens on the Egyptian people? That is how things work in their own countries, after all: there, ministries act according to the will of the people, and can barely stray from it at all. So we let foreigners imagine that we live as they do, that our system of government is as democratic as theirs, that our Ministry answers to nothing but reason, untouched by love or hatred, guided by neither favor nor grudge — that it simply follows the people's will, and finds, in pursuing their hopes and managing their interests, that when the people move forward, it moves with them; when the people hold back, it holds back too; and whatever the people want, it wants as well.

This is exactly what many foreigners believe of us — and once they believe it, they saddle the people with the Ministry's burdens, blame the people for the Ministry's mistakes, and hold the people responsible for whatever missteps the Ministry gets itself into. So when they hear something has gone wrong in Egypt's official affairs, they don't conclude that the Ministry erred or blundered — they conclude instead that the Egyptian people remains ignorant, careless, poorly cultivated, out of step with the age it lives in. And so these unlucky times go on wronging this unfortunate country: the few commit the fault, or the sin, and the many bear its consequences.

There is one thing that truly pains me — I know nothing more wounding to a noble spirit, nothing that strikes a pure heart harder, nothing more damaging to the reputation of a rising people, than this shameful affair, whose chapters have played out over several years now: first between the Egyptian government and Mukhtar while he lived, then between the Egyptian government and Mukhtar's heirs after death took him. Or better: this is not really a dispute between the Ministry and any

one person, or any single group — it is a dispute between the Ministry and art itself, which ought to stand higher, last longer, and be held in greater esteem than any ministry, any person, or any group. Or better still: this is a dispute between a ministry established to serve the people, which instead makes the people taste every shade of humiliation, and a people who founded that ministry and pay for its keep, only to be struck down by it again and again. All of this can be said, and all of it is true — and it is said with bitter regret and burning grief.

Mukhtar raised two statues to Egypt's great man, after reaching an agreement with the Egyptian Ministry that all of Egypt accepted — not through Parliament alone, but through every one of its sons together. Then came the ministry of the great Dictator, Sidqi Pasha, and it swept aside the people's will as though it were nothing, and trampled the people's dignity underfoot — and just as Saad's own tomb was seized, Mukhtar was forced to take his case against that ministry to the courts. The dispute ran its natural course: reported inside Egypt as a story of Egyptians wronged in their dignity and their freedom, reported abroad as a story of Egyptians wronged in their reputation and their standing. For this was a dispute over a leader the whole nation loved — would these statues of the man the people cherished be raised, or would they not? And it was a dispute over Egyptian art itself, which had first bloomed more than fifteen centuries ago and had won Egypt a place among the artistic nations of the modern world — would it be allowed to live, and art to live through it, or must it die, and art die along with it?

And all this played out in the twentieth century, in the very age when Egypt was sending ambassadors to every corner of the earth, when Egypt's representatives sat at every international conference, when trumpets everywhere proclaimed that Egypt was rising again, returning to her old ways, becoming once more a wellspring of learning, art, philosophy, and letters.

Yes — this dispute unfolded even as those grand proclamations rang out. Egyptians watched, and grieved. Foreigners watched, and marveled. And Mukhtar watched, and grief consumed him until it killed him — yet his death did not end the dispute. When has this Ministry ever shrunk from quarreling with the dead? Does it not still quarrel with Saad over his very legacy? Does it not quarrel with him over his statues? Does it not quarrel with him over the one thing a noble man should never be quarreled over — his grave?

Then it occurs to the Ministry to settle with the heirs. If only it had thought of settling with the man himself before he died in despair. Instead it settles with his heirs at the treasury's expense, with no regard for the people's will, no respect for the people's rights, no care for the sanctity owed the dead — offering the heirs thousands of pounds, afraid of what a court might rule if the case ran its course, hoping to buy their satisfaction and put the whole affair behind it. But on one condition: that Saad not be satisfied. That Saad's own people not be satisfied. That Mukhtar not be satisfied. That Mukhtar's art not be satisfied. On condition that neither statue ever be raised, and that no one ever speak of them again. Why? What is it about these two statues that frightens the government? Saad's image? Hardly — it is carved into the heart of every Egyptian, hung in every Egyptian home, and only grows more permanent, more widespread, the more it is persecuted. No — what the Ministry fears is not Saad's image, but its own weakness: it cannot bring itself to admit Saad's greatness. It cannot rise above its own stubbornness. And its war does not stop at Saad and his statues, or at Mukhtar and his art — it lets Mukhtar's entire legacy scatter and blow away in the wind, though that legacy is the one thing modern Egypt has to show the world in art. So this is a Ministry that makes war on art, so long as the art is Egyptian, hounding it, exposing it to ruin — but let the art be foreign, and it wins every backing, every protection, every care; money is spent freely on it, and the Ministry wears itself thin serving it.

Our Ministry, then, does not make war on art because it is art — it makes war on art precisely because it is Egyptian! What a horror. What an anguish. What a grief! . . . How can an Egyptian ministry bring itself to make war on Egypt's own art? How can a ministry with Egyptian blood running in its members' veins make war on the Egyptian nation itself? Why? What crime did Mukhtar commit? What grudge did anyone hold against him, that the Ministry should hound him with its fury, in life and after death? Mukhtar's crime was wanting to raise two statues to the great Saad. And whoever glorifies Saad, or tries to, has earned this sentence for himself: to be pursued by fury and persecution, living or dead.

Do you see this ingratitude now? Can you picture how ugly it is, how hideous? And on top of everything else, this too falls on your account, and on the account of every Egyptian abroad: that Europeans, hearing the story of Saad persecuted after his death, and the story of Mukhtar persecuted after his, conclude that the Egyptian people remains ignorant,

careless, uncivilized — that it has not yet grasped that ingratitude is among the vilest of vices and the ugliest of traits; that it feels no shame in turning against its own great men, its leaders, its geniuses, however much good they have done it, simply because it cannot recognize greatness, leadership, genius, or generosity when it sees them. So which Egyptian could possibly want to be spoken of in these terms?

Taha Hussein

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