

The Devils' Night . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), November 8, 1934

The sky was clear, as clear as ever people had known it; the air was fine, as fine as ever the living had known it; and the sun shone radiant in its rising, its beautiful light shimmering through the layers of the air, filling the universe with life, vigor, joy, and beauty, and filling people's hearts with peace, and love of peace, and safety, and a longing to preserve that safety.

And the people were joyful, glad, sweet smiles for life etched upon their faces, mirroring the trust in life within their souls and their confidence in this calm which God had lavished upon them so abundantly that it flooded their souls and hearts and filled their consciences with delight, contentment, and peace. Among them were those setting out for their work, loving it and eager for it; among them were those leaving their work behind, seeking rest and recreation, and preparing themselves to resume a fresh and fruitful activity. And the affairs of government lay with men whom the people loved and who loved the people in turn, with whom the people were pleased and who were pleased with the people, men who bore their trust with strength, resolve, and endurance, with faith in God and confidence in the people, conducting affairs as guardians of right and justice, seeking nothing but the satisfaction of the constitution and the law, and that their consciences rise above anything that might stir pain, or regret, or sorrow, or the need for apology within them — rewarding the one who did good, never excessive in punishing the one who did wrong, striking down none but those whose offenses it would be a sin and a dereliction to overlook — and the people, in all this, were content and rejoicing. Then a cloud appears in the distance; the people scarcely look at it, for they scarcely take notice of it, scarcely expect any harm from it. But the cloud draws near, and draws nearer still; then a faint hum precedes it, then this hum grows louder and spreads through the air; then the cloud draws near, and draws nearer still, and this sound advancing before it grows stronger and wider — and behold, it is the rumble of thunder, the raging of the whirlwind, the crash of the storm-wind. And behold, the clarity of the sky has turned to murk; the fineness of the air has turned to gloom; the beautiful, radiant sun has suddenly hidden itself behind this hideous, ugly, foul cloud; and behold, terror has seized the people from every side, and evil has been let loose upon them from every quarter, and dread has found its way into their

hearts by every path, and safety has been utterly wiped from their hearts, and hope has been shut fast against their faces, and they find themselves in a thick, unrelenting, impenetrable darkness, seeing nothing in it, hearing nothing in it, knowing neither where they are going within it: whether to advance or retreat. God forgive us — for now they began to see hideous, terrifying phantoms, not knowing where they had come from. Had they descended from the sky? But the sky was never a dwelling-place for devils. Had the earth split open to release them? For people have long said that devils live beneath the earth. Or had they ridden the backs of the winds and the storms from far and distant places, until they descended upon Egypt, and corrupted everything upon her and upon her people? The people came to see nothing in this darkness but these foul phantoms, came to hear nothing in this darkness but their hideous voices, proclaiming that the age of justice had ended, that the shadow of right must vanish, that the dominion of falsehood wished to spread its shadow wide over the earth, and that the soldiers of falsehood had come to occupy the citadels and overrun the strongholds. Then, in but a moment, the voices of evil proclaimed that Sidqi Pasha had leapt upon power in a single bound, and had spread his hand over it with neither justice nor right nor order nor law, with no regard for the public good, no preservation of dignity, no concern for the approval of creation or of conscience.

Suddenly the sun of right set, and suddenly the night of falsehood descended, and the devils of falsehood rose up from every quarter, filling the air with their hideous turmoil and their foul clamor, spreading across the earth a corruption the earth had never known before, casting upon the people an abasement the people had never known before, and raising up tyranny as an edifice people had believed could never be raised.

Do you know this long, heavy night? Do you know what the long, heavy night brings of worries and dread to the waking, when sleeplessness seizes them, and what the long, heavy night brings of fear and terror, of panic and fright, of dread and turmoil, to the sleeping, when nightmare overtakes them? Do you know all this? Can you picture all this to yourself? Then know that this long, heavy night, this Devils' Night, came upon the people bearing worse than all this. It came upon some of them pursuing death, hunting them down; it came upon some of them bearing pain, moving now in hiding, now in the open; it came upon some of them with torment of conscience; it came upon some of them with corruption of character; it came upon some of them with the

plundering of their wealth, and upon some of them with the violation of their sanctities; and it came upon all of them together with abasement entire, with injustice universal, and with fetters and chains — to bind freedom with them and shackle it, to knot tongues with them so they could not speak, to shatter pens with them so they could not write, to force people by them into stillness so they could not move, and into scattering so they could not gather, to make people small in their own eyes by them, and small in the eyes of others by them, and to make Egypt small in the eyes of the civilized world by them. With all this, and with worse than all this, the Devils' Night descended upon Egypt and the Egyptians.

Sidqi Pasha opened his door, and Sidqi Pasha settled upon the dais of command and prohibition within it, and Sidqi Pasha took to commanding, and the devils obeyed; to scheming, and the devils carried it out; he frowned, and the devils trembled in fear and dread; he smiled, and the devils danced a hideous, terrifying dance. And behind Sidqi Pasha there had settled powers that steered him and made use of him, casting over his face, now the veil of the frown, now the paint of the smile — and the man received the veil of the frown and imagined he was frowning of his own will; received the paint of the smile and imagined he was smiling of his own will; issued the order he had merely received and imagined he was commanding; announced the scheme handed down to him and imagined he was scheming — a statue that took itself for a man, an image that supposed itself a living person.

How mighty is vanity, and how vast its dominion over men! Sidqi Pasha was deceived, and took himself for something; his associates were deceived, and took themselves for ministers. Still the storms raged, still the devils labored, still Sidqi Pasha and his associates went on receiving and issuing, plotting and commanding, until the man grew too weak even to serve as an instrument, too incapable even to serve as an image; illness overtook him, then failure overtook him, then those who had wielded him grew weary of him, and one of them said: this man is vain, let us turn from him to a man who is not vain. And another said: this man sees himself as something, let us turn from him to a man who sees that he is nothing. And another said: the good-natured man is in Paris — and they brought the good-natured man, and set him in the place of the great man; they called him, and he answered; they raised him up, and he stood; they commanded him, and he obeyed. And the Devils' Night wore on, long and heavy, scarcely seeming to end, scarcely even seeming to advance — but

the sun rose again as suddenly as it had set, the sky cleared, the air turned fine again, the cloud began to draw away and away, the voice of thunder began to fade and fade, and here we are now, watching the cloud recede, receding ever further into the distance, watching the rumble of thunder, the raging of the whirlwind, the crash of the storm-wind turn to a hum that fades and fades, and watching safety find its way back into people's hearts by its own paths — and then you look, and see the good-natured man boarding the train in Alexandria, returning to Cairo to sweep away the neglect that has gathered there, until His Excellency Tawfiq Nessim Pasha comes forward to deliver this era its finishing blow, and to release its men and its supporters from this long death-agony. Have you seen soldiers condemned to death, when the sentence is carried out upon them? They fall, struck down; then he who is to execute the verdict upon them steps forward, and grants them release with one final shot from the throes of death and the struggle of pain. For God's decree has gone forth against this era, and God's judgment has been carried out upon this era, and this era lies struck down, and it awaits only the final shot that will draw over it the curtain of extinction, release it from every pain, and deliver it over to history. And this shot is coming, beyond any doubt — coming today, or coming tomorrow, coming in any case. Nor are we loath to witness this era's death-agony; nor are we loath to witness this era's death-agony; nor are we loath to see it thrash and stagger, bearing the heavy weight of pain through the throes of death — for this era used to find a guilty pleasure in the torment of the innocent, and so there is no wrong in the innocent finding their own consciences at ease now that God's justice has taken its course, and the people's word has risen high.

We do hear certain faint cries stirring through the air, which people take for a defense of this era, a struggle to preserve it.

No — they are the cries of despair; they are the groans of the death-agony; they are the portents of extinction. Egyptians would do well to look, for morning has begun to break; Egyptians would do well to rejoice, for the Devils' Night has lifted from them.

Taha Hussein

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