

In Cairo: Between Admiration and Sorrow

Misr al-Fatat, 11 November 1909

In ruined Messina there stood a house adorned by the craftsman's hand with all the ornament and imagery it could devise, and its beauty was increased by the excellence of its site, the quality of its situation, and by the beauty of the view and the majesty of nature that surrounded it; for it stood upon a hill overlooking the sea, and was encircled by a garden that gathered together varieties of trees that doubled the joy of the glad heart and consoled the grief of the sorrowful.

The sun had set, and the sky, in dread of her going or in awe of the night, showed pity for her; and man, as ever, put on a garment of heedlessness and oblivion, concerned with nothing but his own affairs, caring for nothing but himself, keeping no promise except as it served some need of his own. Indeed, man watched the sun as it inclined toward setting, without so much as a glance of farewell.

He saw her grown pale, sorrow at their parting plainly upon her, yet he repaid her nothing for it.

He saw her bidding him farewell — indeed he sees her do so every day, so that her farewell makes no impression on his heart; yet had he looked at her truly today, he would have known that her sorrow at parting was doubled, and that she had never grieved as she grieved today.

Why, and for what reason? Is it because she is going and will not return, or because she will return and find none of us left?

Did our friend fear some evil from the night upon us, or did she read some ill omen in the faces of the rising stars? Did she perceive, from tidings of the unseen, what the heavens would soon bring to pass? Did she know that the tempest of wrath against mankind had reached its full measure in nature, so that this night nature resolved upon vengeance — questions whose only answer is bitter, painful truths?

And how I pity mankind! He indulges his passions and persists in his vanity; he supposes, having enslaved the weaker animals and the lesser things, that he possesses power and might; he imagines, having pressed

air, water, steam, and electricity into his service, that he has become the master set over nature and all that is in it — why then can he not keep the earth from quaking, nor restrain the volcano from raging, nor hold back the tyranny of the sea, nor turn aside the thunderbolts of heaven? Far from it, far from it! The seeker has grown weary, and the sought has proven too great.

Stand, O feeble man, humbled before this overwhelming force which you cannot repel; surrender to it, willing or unwilling, what remains of your power and might.

*Take provision from this world, for tomorrow morning
you shall descend to a dwelling you will not praise.*

How tender is the lover! How limpid his soul! I have stood, in the course of my days, in the place of one who takes heed from the turning of the stars, who is admonished by the change of fortune; and this station has stirred in me nothing but sorrow, and this reflection has only increased my anxiety; I find myself foretelling sudden partings and descending calamities.

Woe is me for your sake, O beloved! Nay, woe is us both! We came to this love with a wide hope, and we shall depart from it without having been cured of its affliction, or having slaked its thirst.

Tarry a while, O thou who descends upon us; have mercy on me and on my beloved; grant us, him and me, a respite until we may gather the fruit of this blossoming love; for we have drawn already within a bowshot of it.

Precious maxims, tinged with something of the tenderness and compassion of women, moved through the breast of the queen of beauty and mistress of loveliness, as she sat upon the loggia of that house, on a silken chair, bowed in thought; her wide dark eyes might catch the glimmer of the moon in the sky, whose silver rays let down their threads to the branches and blossoms of the garden, taking on a wondrous form that filled the eye with delight and the heart with ease; and sometimes she cast her gaze further still, and saw the sea calm but for the playful teasing of the breeze, and would almost have read upon it signs of a scowl, were it not for the light the moon cast over it and the glimmer of the stars; and she might raise her eyes a little and see the mountains of Calabria, their peaks clothed in snow, a silvery hide upon which fell the moonlight and the sparkle of the stars, as though they were lamps hung

from the sky on cords of gold. She would gaze on all this splendour, and return from it with nothing but fresh sorrow and renewed grief.

So she sat, and beside her a young man of upright bearing and fine appearance, whom one could tell at a glance to be an infantry officer in the army; he sat beside her lighting a cigarette, watching her with wide eyes beneath a pair of arched brows — watching her with a purity and reverence like that with which one gazes, in a shrine, upon the image of the Virgin — and asked her in a quiet voice: ‘What is this silence, my beloved? Why do you not speak to me? Look at me, let me hear your sweet voice, speak — what are you thinking of?’

The fair one roused from her long reverie, and answered in a voice ringing with sorrow: ‘I do not know, beloved; indeed I was not thinking of anything at all... not even of our approaching wedding. No, I was not thinking of that just now. Why should I, and is there anything that could stand between us and it? No; there is no one in the world who could do such a thing. Nothing, beloved, nothing but death — and even our union is in God’s keeping, and He is the best of guardians. I find myself very sad; I feel a tightness, a constriction in my breast; I feel many pains.’

‘Why, my beloved? What does a lover grieve for, and what is the nature of his grief? Is not love the whole of happiness?’ ‘Yes indeed.’ ‘Then do you fear something for our love?’ ‘No; God has undertaken to watch over it.’ ‘Then what do you grieve for?’ Then he leaned toward her a little, and touched her radiant brow with his lips; and she took up an oud that lay beside her, and began to sing.

*Would that the nights and days, since they have kept faith with my love
and yours,*

might not betray us to misfortune!

*Who is there for me, and who for you, to grant an abiding serenity,
until the soul attains what it hopes for?*

She repeated this song in a voice the ears could scarcely catch, yet it worked upon the mind and heart like old wine; and it was no wonder that the young man forgot himself until the burning cigarette began to scorch his lips, so he threw it down and gave himself over entirely to the song. And when the fair one had finished, he took up the oud himself, and began to sing, striking it with fingers that knew how to wield nothing so well as a sword upon the field of battle:

*The nights and days have sworn that they will not betray,
nor deliver us to misfortune;
how should there be for us, you and me, an abiding serenity,
until the soul attains what it hopes for?*

This is what we hope for. No sooner had the young man finished his song than the bells of the churches proclaimed that ten hours of the evening had passed, and everything in the city began to take its share of quiet.

‘I commend you to God, my beloved; I commend you to God, O Zenta. Away with all who watch us! But do not grieve, for before long the night will bring us together again, after having kept us apart.’

‘Patience, O Gennaro; wait a little, until I have filled my eyes with the sight of you.’ So she said, and stretched out her arms to him and embraced him long, and two tears glimmered in her eyes like moist pearls, as she said: ‘I fear I shall not see you again after this.’ After a while the two embracing figures parted, and she said in a calm voice: ‘Now you may go, in God’s keeping; for your image has taken hold of my heart. Go, Gennaro; sleep your fill; dream, if you wish, of whatever you like — you are myself.’

*He went his way, his hopes still sweet to him,
yet he surrendered them to grief and lament;
he suffers still the old fire of love,
and is scorched by embers of it still burning;
so he slept, and tasted of sleep and slumber
nothing but tears that called forth sighs.*

He woke from his sleep in terror, four hours of the evening having passed. ‘What has woken me now, when I had not yet had my full share of rest? I was sunk in sweet sleep, threaded through with lovely dreams; I was happy, close beside my beloved.’

He drew breath, and found the air full of the smell of sulphur; he leaned from the window, and found the stars sunk from sight and the atmosphere lowering; he made out the sea, and found the first signs of tumult already stirring in it, as though it were gathering itself to leap; so he stood bewildered, fear toying with his heart, then called to mind the events of the day before, and remembered his beloved’s sorrow, and knew that she had truly foretold what was to come — and scarcely had he

realized this than he heard what sounded like a mighty explosion in the depths of the earth.

'It is the earthquake — I must save my beloved, I must rescue Zenta!' So he hastened to dress, when a great tremor seized him and worked its way to the very tips of his fingers; he snatched up a light cloak and wrapped it about himself, and ran out toward his beloved's house. It lay some distance from his own; and as he reached the middle of the road, a great shock threw him onto his back, and dizziness overcame him.

He opened his eyes, and saw the buildings of the city dancing a mournful dance, and heard the waves of the sea crashing like funeral music — save that this music escorted but a single dead man, while that other mourned an entire city.

Alas for nature, offending and suffering in the same moment! The young man made to rise, but was held down by a huge boulder that had fallen upon his chest, bruising him, breaking two of his ribs, and delivering him into unconsciousness; then his beloved's voice rang in his ears, crying for help, and he came to himself with blood pouring from his mouth, and struggled with the boulder until he had shifted it from his chest; then he ran on, scarcely conscious, toward his beloved's house, and after great effort reached it, and scaled the garden wall; and there the house stood, half collapsed, the other half crumbling still; and had it not been for the mist of dizziness over his eyes, golden locks of hair, stirred by the morning breeze, would have shown him at once where his beloved lay — but he struggled on until he entered her bedchamber; there the bed lay overturned, the fragments of the lamp scattered about the room; he turned toward the loggia, and there he saw the fair one fallen, bent double beside the balustrade, her golden locks surrendered to the breeze; so he took off his own cloak and cast it over her, then began to listen for the beating of her heart, and found that it had stopped; and then the arrows of despair fastened upon his heart, and a cry burst from his mouth borne on a rush of blood, and he collapsed beside her, and lay thus, felled, for three days.

On the morning of the fourth day, ships cast their anchors upon the shore of the ruined city, and cannon of mourning for humanity thundered through the air; the young man woke to the sound of the shells and the roar of the cannon: 'Steady, Gennaro — these are not the enemy's guns, but the guns of the sons of man come to the aid of their brothers.' He looked, and saw nothing but birds of prey tearing at human flesh; he

drew breath, and the stench of corpses nearly choked him.

After a while he heard the voices of people, and cried out in a faint voice: 'Help, help! Aid, aid!' A ladder was set up at once, up which a fair young woman climbed, risking her own life, heedless of what might befall her; she climbed swiftly, eagerly, and no sooner had she seen the death of the two lovers than her heart broke with grief for this son of the people and defender of his homeland; as for him, no sooner did he see a fair woman carrying a small bag with a golden clasp than he recognized her.

Yes — he recognized his benefactress; he recognized the crowned lady; he recognized the Queen of Italy, whom he had so often seen beside his lord the King at the festivals of Rome; and he offered her a word of thanks, and she drew near to him with some medicine to aid him — but what use is medicine, when the young man had already slipped back into his swoon?

*She wept, and within her heart was anguish,
and from her eye there fell a steady stream of tears;
she prayed with pious devotion to God —
but no devotion could ever restore the dead to life.*

The crowned lady knelt beside him, grieving, weeping, her voice broken by tears, saying: 'O God! Two lovers, borne away by death upon a single wing!'

'Look, O compassionate Queen — the floods of death have carried off the young man's reason; he gazes at you longingly, believing you to be his beloved; listen, he calls to you now in a faint voice: "Embrace me, my beloved, embrace me, O Zenta — I am about to die!"' The crowned lady leaned toward him, closed his eyes with two chaste kisses, and embraced him long; and upon his lips there lingered a faint smile, as he said: 'I always knew that you were alive.'

In God's keeping, O you two lovers; and to you, O Queen, be fair praise.