

The Forbidden Paradise

al-Balagh, 27 May 1945

In these days of mounting heat, the sun sends down its own rays upon us — a radiant light, and a scorching flame, melting bodies, and very nearly melting minds and hearts along with them.

In these days, people do not tire of long conversations about paradises of bliss, with their ample shade and dense trees, their rivers flowing in abundance, their breeze stirring, cool and enchanting, refreshing the body and reviving the soul. People do not tire of talking about these paradises, and perhaps find some real delight, when their own work allows it, in thinking of them, and summoning them up within themselves — savouring, in imagination, what they are not granted the chance to savour in reality.

It strikes me that we do not suffer only from this exhausting heat, the gift of summer alone — we suffer, too, from another heat, no less exhausting, no less scorching, one no season of the year sends down upon us, no star casts down upon us, but one human beings alone visit upon other human beings, one the strong impose upon the weak, spread over us by these numerous, complex, tangled circumstances we might well labour to analyse, explain, and interpret, only to find, in the end, that they all trace back to a single source, in the life of individuals and communities alike, and in the relations between states and peoples: that justice has not yet settled within the human soul, has not yet become one of its own faculties, one of its own constituent elements, one of life's own necessities — remaining, in this modern age, exactly as it remained in ages long past, a mere hope among hopes, one hearts yearn for without ever tasting it, one souls aspire to without ever attaining it, one minds reach toward without ever truly realizing it, achieving it only the way a poor, wretched, deprived man achieves this same paradise of bliss, with its entwined trees, its flowing rivers, its rippling breeze — realizing this paradise only within himself, burning with longing for it, consumed by desire for it, while his own harsh life holds him fast within the poverty pressing upon him, the bitter deprivation, the exhausting toil, the drenching sweat, and the painful suffering he actually lives.

I hope you will not imagine, as I take up this piece, that I am simply reaching for some manner of literary flourish, some variety of ornamented speech — I assure you the life we actually live in these days

tempts one toward no such literary ornament, inspires no desire whatsoever to embellish one's own words. It is, rather, a pallid life, filling hearts with its own pallor, spreading through them a dense darkness. What actually drew me to this subject was something I have just read, in one of the election speeches Mr. Churchill, the British Prime Minister, has been broadcasting to his own countrymen. He is reported as saying that among the new world's own high ideals is that people should live secure from fear — and he holds that, should this fear originate in one people's own aggression against another, or one state's own violation of another's sanctity, then whatever measures the United Nations adopt to organize peace and establish world security on a solid foundation will guarantee the dispelling of this fear, will turn the aggressor back from his own aggression, and will secure some peoples against others. But Mr. Churchill recognizes another fear, no less grave than this one — and appears not to know how to remove it, or ward off its own harm from people. This is the fear stirred not by one people's aggression against another, nor by one state's domination of another, but by a government's own aggression against its own individual citizens, and by tyrannical regimes' own domination over people's own lives.

This is the fear certain families, under certain governments, sense constantly — the fear that a knock might come at the door, at any moment whatsoever, without any prior warning or expectation, and that, once opened, the family will find the authorities' own agents standing there, come to seize their own breadwinner, and cast him into some dark dungeon — as the ancient Arab poet puts it — leaving his own dependents behind, the aged grandfather among them, the frail wife, the small children, exposed to hunger and misery, finding no one to support or provide for them, nothing left to spend — and this family's own breadwinner may return to them one day, or he may never return at all.

This same fear filled European hearts, in a great many European countries, between the two wars — and throughout this present war, which has not yet fully ended. Mr. Churchill appears far from confident that the victory granted the Allies in Europe has erased it, and wiped away its own traces; he appears genuinely to wish the victors might find some way to remove this fear, yet does not know how it might actually be removed.

The independence states enjoy places each independent state's own internal politics safely beyond foreign interference; it is entirely possible — indeed, it is the actual reality — that a genuinely democratic state, one

guaranteeing its own citizens liberty, fraternity, and equality, should stand alongside another state possessing nothing whatsoever of democracy, or knowing of democracy nothing but empty names signifying nothing at all, or not even bothering with these same names meant to deceive foreigners, openly declaring instead whatever system it pleases, one guaranteeing people neither security, nor freedom, nor equality, but founding their own affairs upon oppression, brute force, and the ruler's own arbitrary authority — so that a knock comes at a family's own door, at any time, without warning, and no sooner is it opened than the family's own breadwinner is seized, cast alive into some hidden corner of a prison, or cast out dead in the open desert, or his own body burned, and its own ashes scattered by the wind.

It is entirely possible, too — indeed, it is the actual reality — that a just, democratic state should stand alongside an unjust, tyrannical one, and witness whatever atrocities occur, whatever crimes are committed, without doing anything at all about it, simply because it cannot do anything about it, prevented by its own tyrannical, unjust neighbour's own independence — an independence held sacred, one it is never permissible to challenge or violate.

France, for instance, stood between Fascist Italy and Hitler's Germany, saw what she saw, heard what she heard, condemned what she condemned — yet did nothing whatsoever about it. What am I saying? She went further still, attempting, as far as any attempt could take her, to conciliate Hitler and Mussolini, preferring her own safety and seeking to avoid war. Say the same of Great Britain: she witnessed from Italy and Germany exactly what France witnessed, sought conciliation with them exactly as France did, and, when matters grew truly grave, was actually the first to seek this same conciliation — Chamberlain sought out Hitler, then sought out Mussolini afterward, and this seeking achieved nothing at all. What could not be avoided came to pass regardless: war broke out, and ended in the Allies' own victory, and people believed they would now find security from both internal and external fear alike. Yet Mr. Churchill speaks in his own electoral constituency, saying he hopes external fear will be removed through whatever peace arrangements are settled upon — while confessing there remains an internal fear he does not know how to remove.

The truth is, we did not need to wait for Mr. Churchill's own speech yesterday to know that security from this internal fear remains far off — nor did we need to wait for Mr. Churchill's own speech yesterday to know

that security from external fear remains far off too, whatever measures are being taken to establish a Security Council, and to organize peace, in this new world.

Pascal — the well-known French writer — set this very matter in its own true perspective three centuries ago, when he expressed the wish, in that sentence Édouard Herriot reminded us of not long ago, that a balance might be struck between justice and power, such that justice might grow strong enough that the aggressive would no longer covet it, and power might be transformed so that it no longer tyrannizes the weak, who find no one to protect them from tyranny and aggression.

As long as humanity fails to achieve this balance between power and justice, fails to soften power with something of justice, and strengthen justice with something of power's own excess, some people will continue tyrannizing others, some will continue tasting others' own violence, and injustice — both internal and external — will continue finding, in human life, a genuinely fertile field to grow in.

Is it genuinely true that whatever measures are taken to organize peace will actually secure people from external fear? I myself doubt this very seriously — since security from one people's aggression against another can never be achieved except through genuine equality among peoples, with no distinction drawn between strong and weak, rich and poor, small and great, those far advanced in civilization and those who have received only a modest share of it. This is something the old League of Nations was never able to achieve, and something the San Francisco Conference has proven unable to achieve either. As long as there remain great powers monopolizing strength and might, and small states unable to defend themselves against aggression, the spectres of external fear will remain standing just beyond the horizon, appearing whenever it occurs to them to trouble people once more.

The old League of Nations proved powerless to protect the great powers from one another's own harm, and all the San Francisco Conference, and whatever institutions arise from it, can hope to achieve is exactly what the League of Nations failed to achieve — securing the great powers from aggression against one another.

I do not know whether even this purpose will be achieved, or whether the means toward it will fail regardless. As for the small and middling states, their own affairs remain in God's hands, and in their own — and it falls to them, in fairness, to devise whatever plans might protect

them from harm, and secure them against scheming, should they find any real way of doing so.

The victors spoke to us, while they still struggled toward victory, of wishing to secure peoples against aggression, and to secure individuals against injustice and hunger.

Those of sound heart believed victory would fill the earth with justice, after it had been filled with injustice, and would transform this world into a paradise like the paradise God promised His righteous servants in the world to come. Victory has indeed been achieved, dictatorships have collapsed, and the democratic states have won a tremendous triumph — yet peoples still remain afraid of aggression from other peoples. What am I saying? They still complain of aggression from other peoples, and still burn in the fire of that very aggression. As for individuals, no one has given any thought to protecting them from injustice and tyranny, nor even to securing them against the fear that their own doors might be knocked upon, that they might be taken away to where, as Mr. Churchill himself puts it, they never return.

The matter, then — the matter is genuinely simple: there exist, upon this earth, paradises offering boundless bliss to whole communities of people, and to individuals as well — but these paradises remain forbidden to all but their own possessors, walled off by that same tremendous power made of iron and fire, where peoples are concerned, and made of laws and government might, where individuals are concerned.

The British people, or the French people, or the American people, can enjoy the paradise of freedom, protected by their own strength and might, turning away any other people who might wish to enter it, or shelter beneath its shade — and need not concern themselves, afterward, with whatever other peoples continue to suffer the fire of injustice and the torment of tyranny. This or that wealthy individual can likewise enjoy his own splendid palace and magnificent paradise, protected by law, by government might, and by the authority of the courts — and need not concern himself with the poor's own hearts breaking, torn apart by misery, hunger, and deprivation.

If you want the truth, say this: human life, up to now, consists of forbidden paradises, enjoyed by the very few, and a destructive hell, suffered by the many. There is no path toward life becoming a paradise for all people, or a hell for all people equally, except on that day when justice finally becomes one of the human soul's own faculties, one of its

own constituent elements.

And I believe the distance between us and that goal still remains a very long one.