

Holiday Greetings

Misr al-Fatat, 25 December 1909

I know that it has been a long time since my readers last had a letter from me, and that few among them are those who read what I write with real eagerness, wishing there were many such readers; I know this, and to those few I offer my apology for this interruption of my letters, a period they will find long, though I myself find it very short — and I take them, all the same, for forgiving readers. Would my readers believe me if I said that nothing kept me from them but that which makes a poet forget even himself, and turns him aside from everything else?

Will they listen to me if I say: nothing has kept me from writing but a thing such that, had I gone on speaking of it, *Misr al-Fatat* herself would have grown weary of my letters, and they, too, would have wearied of reading them?

Will they pay heed to me if I say that I ceased writing only by my own choice, and that my life in this interval was sweeter to me by far than it is sweet to me today, or will be hereafter?

Ah! How sweet is memory, and how sharp its pain, both at once!

How happy I was yesterday! How wretched I am today! How content I once was with people, how fond of them! And how indignant I am with them now, how impatient! My heart longs to speak, but finds no one to understand it.

Hearts have a speech that tongues cannot deliver and ears cannot take in — a speech that only hearts can understand. I want, just now, to complain, but I find no one to complain to. I want, just now, to counsel, but I find no one to listen.

Alas, the burning of my heart! Counsel and complaint alike are lost between the coldness of dispositions and the deafness of ears! But what business have I with this mournful tone, on a day when everyone else is glad and rejoicing?

My apologies to the readers; I may perhaps be a little too much alive in temperament, or more than a little. And in truth I say: whoever makes light of sorrow and joy has no business living here — or, at the very least, has no business writing to those who see the two of them as the whole of

life. Yet among my readers there is a group who are my partners in this creed, my equals in this belief; so there is no harm, after all this, in offering to the readers as a whole my fairest greeting, and my purest congratulation, on this happy holiday.

I offer them this congratulation and greeting because it is a national custom from which I find no escape.

Yesterday morning I found myself with a great many congratulatory letters before me, and I sat down to go through them thoroughly; and in going through them I found, along the way, both laughter and tears. I began to read those letters, casting one aside and keeping another, brisk and cheerful all the while — until a certain letter fell into my hands, and no sooner had I read it than I passed suddenly from joy to sorrow, from laughter to tears; and, fearing that my companions would notice this in me, I left them with an apology, and withdrew to where I could let the tears run their course and give grief its way.

*What a day it was, whose cares came upon the soul one after another,
until I thought myself undone —
I see the people, each taking his share of misery and of ease, one weeping
and another laughing.*

This letter did not move me so lightly for any eloquence in its meaning, or delicacy in its style, or beauty in its presentation — it moved me only because it was a letter from so-and-so.

I read this letter, and found in it:

‘My dear friend, we came together on a day like this one, with our dear friends around us — blessed be that day! Then, after a few days, we parted, and none remained but you and I; how lovely a memory that is! Then the first days of summer drove us apart; away with that season! I wish you well on this holiday, and I will not lie to you: I find I have no patience left to bear being without you. Lend me your ear, and carry to your heart, from mine, this one word: everything that was said was false. — Your friend’

Why does this letter grieve me? Because it is the letter of someone who was once so dear to me, so beloved to my heart; the bonds between us had grown firm, our connection unbroken — and then it was suddenly severed, on the very day I had hoped it would only grow firmer and closer still.

O you who were once so dear to me, so beloved, who once held my heart entirely, who once toyed with my reason, who once possessed my happiness and my misery, who once knew both my pains and their cure (all of this has been) — peace be upon your old bond, your bygone days, your affection before it turned, and your heart before another came to possess it. By God, the smile of this holiday for me this year is nothing like your smile to me last year, nor is its serenity this year like the serenity of your heart to me the year before, nor is my joy in it this year like my joy at meeting you the year before that.

By God, nothing spoiled what was between us but you yourself; nothing cracked apart your heart and mine but you yourself; nothing brought misery upon our friendship but you yourself. You are the source of our happiness for two years, and the source of our misery for all the rest of time. I complain of you to you, for you alone are the arbiter. We came together on a day like this one, as you say — but let no blessing fall on that day, for it is the very root of my misery. Then, after a few days, we parted, and none remained but you and I, as you say — but how wretched a memory that is, for it is the source of my ordeal. Then the first days of summer drove us apart — so let a blessing fall on that day, for it divided truth from falsehood.

I wish you well on this holiday, and I will not lie to you: I bear your absence with becoming patience. Lend me your ear, and carry to your heart, from mine, this one word: I have called false everything that was said — but I have not been able to call false what I myself have witnessed. And so, farewell.