

Even at Public Celebrations

Misr al-Fatat, 15 January 1910

People have offered no end of counsel and guidance to the Azharis, urging upon them what is good, and warning them away from the idle talk and frivolous speech in which they indulge; yet the Azharis have paid no heed to what they were called to, and have listened neither to the voices of the sincere nor to the mockery of those who scoff.

I had kept myself far from this subject, having resolved not to write, for the time being, anything that might anger anyone, and to confine my writings to matters of literature and romance, since people's taste for these has been so great, and their appetite for them so abundant — had I not been invited to a celebration held by my friend, the man of letters Sheikh Ahmad Hasan al-Zayyat, last Thursday evening, on the occasion of his marriage contract with the daughter of the generous Sayyid Effendi al-Naggar. When I answered the invitation, I was delighted by all the beauty and charm of the gathering, and above all by that kind of old-style singing which I had long yearned to hear. I do not mean, here, to give my opinion of this kind of singing, nor of this enchanting singer, Sheikh al-Hamzawi — but I do mean to say a word that is, in truth, one of sorrow and grief, not of joy and delight.

While the singer was delighting the audience with his beautiful voice, he turned to a manner I did not understand — though I did not blame him for it either. This manner consisted of mocking the Azharis and jeering at them: he began with the grammatical particle 'rubba,' and no sooner had he drawn the verse out a little than he moved on from it to a passage from the 'Ajurrumiyya' [the grammar primer], reciting: 'rubba, and la'alla, and mata, and lam, and waw, and ba, and ta' — at which the audience laughed a great deal, myself among them; though my own laughter was only a mask for the sorrow and grief my heart concealed at the state of degradation and contempt to which the Azharis' standing had sunk. He then moved on to another verse, in the words of the poet:

*If there is wonder in the pomegranate-blossom of the cheek,
then the breast offers pomegranates to whoever desires them.*

He began to repeat this verse with pleasing melodies, then proceeded, in a manner of mockery, to take one word from the verse — 'julnar' [pomegranate-blossom] — and split it into two parts, taking the

second part, 'nar' [fire], and repeating it thus: 'fire upon light, light upon fire, fire upon fire.'

He then explained this refrain by saying: 'the light is in my beloved's face, and the fire is in my own liver.' And if writing could render meaning visibly plain to people, I would have shown my readers just how mocking his manner was, with its plaintive turns and asides — especially his gesturing, as he did so, toward the turbans of the Azhari men present; it was, in truth, very funny indeed.

I do not blame the singer for this; his making sport of the Azharis may well be a form of counsel and guidance in its own way, just as it may be pure artistry aimed at pleasing and delighting his listeners. Either way, it is we Azharis who deserve the blame; for we have made ourselves targets for such humiliations, and have, as time has passed, insisted on nothing but remaining in the stagnation and torpor we are in. May we take heed, then, from such mockery and derision, which recur so often, day after day, until the very word 'Azhari,' or 'mujawir' [a resident student at al-Azhar], has become, among the people, a term of abuse and a disgrace.

May we take heed of all this, and so set right our affairs, and fall short no longer through our own stagnation, and keep pace with others in advancement and progress; for the flood has reached the hilltops, and the belt has passed beyond the navel — and in that there is surely a lesson enough.

On the day of the marriage contract, a poem which the author of this piece composed, congratulating his friend, the host of the celebration, and giving thanks that this celebration had brought him together with a friend from whom he had long been estranged, and had thereby reconciled the two of them:

*O my two friends, my greetings — blessed be the day of the
wedding-contract.*

Blessed be yesterday, for it granted me a gift beyond price.

*Blessed be last night's evening, in which time itself pleased me,
a night in which I obtained, of my share of fortune, what healed me.*

*A night whose praise my tongue, yesterday, fell short of expressing.
It is not for the beauty of the songs' performance that I praise it.*

*Rather I praise it for the sweetness of my companionship with a certain
friend,*

and my joy in a friend who was in the finest state —

at ease in mind, cool of eye, free from any distress.

I did not cease reveling until I thought myself in Paradise.

While we were thus, the two moons were led forth in procession.

Ah, O Zayyat, how beautiful are the hours of one's hopes!

They stirred in my soul the memory of boundless enchantment.

Were it not for my ill luck, I would be none other than Ibn Hani himself.

*O brother of my soul, poetry itself proved too narrow for these
congratulations.*

Do not blame me if I summoned poetry, and poetry disobeyed me.

My love for you, O Zayyat, is too great for eloquence to describe.

From the sincerity of my affection for you come such firm bonds indeed.

O my friend — and, by my life, would that you two believed me!

Ah, how much love I hold hidden for you both, if only you knew!

Truly praiseworthy is he for whom my heart holds the best place.

My very soul be a ransom for you both against the assaults of fate.

*May you both live on for my sake, until God brings my own time to its
end.*

I have spoken at length, O Zayyat — so may you be blessed in this union.