

Tragedy . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), September 17, 1934

As for those upon whom this tragedy's harm fell — and they number some seventy-odd scholars of al-Azhar — they received it as their faith had taught them to receive misfortune: with patience, with steadfastness, with faith in what is right, with trust in God's justice, and with a waiting for that fair reckoning which, even if God should delay it as a trial of them, a testing of their character, an increase of their good deeds, and an accumulation of their reward, will surely reach them in the end — for God, exalted is He, has made it known that He wrongs no one in the least, that He lets no man's due go to waste, and that He never stands between the wronged and the justice owed them.

As for those who enacted this tragedy, who poured its harm upon the wronged without restraint, they remain exactly as they were on the day they first ventured upon this cruelty and drove themselves to this violence — strong, vigorous men, savoring the softness of life, delighting in its good things, smiling at the sunlight when they rise in the morning, settling contentedly into the darkness of night when evening falls, conversing with one another, reassuring one another, feeling for one another, going about their lives after this tragedy exactly as they went about them before — no sorrow touching their hearts, no grief reaching their souls, no regret arriving at their consciences, no gloom shadowing their faces, as though they had done nothing at all, wronged no one at all, and never stood between children and that lawful sustenance which ought never to be withheld from little ones — sustenance earned by good fathers for their innocent children.

As though they had not driven a whole company of men from that security which is a scholar's due into a fear no scholar should ever know; as though they had not turned away from learning men created for learning, nor diverted from teaching men who had prepared their whole lives for teaching; as though they had not barred from the teaching of religion and the calling to it men who had trained themselves precisely for the teaching of religion and the calling to it.

Yes — those who brought about this tragedy now enjoy the softness of life, while more than seventy of their brothers in learning endure a harsh and bitter existence; they savor life's good things, while some of their brothers in faith suffer the worst suffering known to men in these

dark days; they smile at the sun when they rise in the morning, while some of their brothers in learning and faith greet that same sun with faces bearing no smile of comfort, security, or peace, but only the smile of patient endurance, of acceptance of God's decree, and of trust that God's justice is near.

They settle contentedly into the darkness of night when evening falls, while some of their brothers in learning and faith greet that same darkness with hearts aching from whatever harm the day has brought them, with souls troubled and apprehensive over whatever harm tomorrow may bring, and yet, in their consciences, with faith and trust that God's justice is near all the same.

Yes — those who brought about this tragedy three years ago remain exactly as they were on the day they brought it about. Regret has not yet reached their souls; grief has not yet reached their hearts; it has not yet dawned upon their consciences that they wronged their brothers, that they struck them down without any right to do so, that they dealt cruelly with them for no cause that could justify cruelty, that they wished evil upon men to whom they ought to have wished good, and that they cast them — together with the wives, children, and dependents in their care — as prey to those ravenous beasts that now plague Egyptian life in these days: the beasts of fear, anxiety, misery, wretchedness, and deprivation.

Yes — they have not grieved, have not repented, have not called any of this to mind, have not given any of it a moment's thought. And yet three years is time enough for the sinner to repent, for the one who erred to return to what is right, for the heedless to be roused from his heedlessness, for the ignorant to awaken from his ignorance, for whoever is capable of learning a lesson to learn it, and for whoever is prepared to taste both the pain and the sweetness of remorse at once to feel remorse.

Three years is time enough for reflection, for reconsideration, for a return to what is right and a turning away from what is false, for correcting an error and giving the wronged their due. These three years are time enough for the Sheikh of al-Azhar and those who assisted him in this tragedy to have come to see that they had been excessive against themselves and against these men, that it was their duty, for their own sake and for the sake of these men, to repent of this excess and return to the moderation that befits them, that they had been in error, and that it was their duty to return to what is right, to restore to these men their due, and to bring them back to the posts where they once worked. But to

this day the Sheikh of al-Azhar and his associates have come to see nothing of this — or they have chosen not to see it — or perhaps they knew everything full well at the very moment they took the action they took, and yet proceeded regardless, neither afraid nor apprehensive, giving no thought to any reckoning at all.

How harsh and coarse the hearts of men can be; how rough and callous their natures; how deeply some consciences love to sink into slumber. The Sheikh of al-Azhar and his associates have watched these wronged men for three years now, bearing their injustice, suffering its pains, enduring it with dignity, withstanding it with fortitude of spirit — and surely something in what they see of these men's condition, and what they know of their circumstances, ought to be enough to poison the days and drive sleep from their eyelids through the night. Yet the Sheikh of al-Azhar and his associates pass their days in bright content and ease, and sleep their nights through untroubled, their eyelids never wearied by care, never disturbed by remorse, never haunted by dreams.

I knew, even before Sidqi Pasha cast the shadow of this era over the Egyptians, that the world holds much injustice, and that all men are liable both to commit wrong and to suffer it. But never in my life could I have imagined that noble al-Azhar itself would be struck by what has struck it in this era — that the livelihoods of more than seventy of its scholars would be cut off in a single brief moment, without inquiry, without investigation, without trial, without regard for any sanctity that ought to be respected, without consideration for any circumstance, without a thought given to what would become of this vast number of religious scholars and the young and helpless dependents in their care, without any accounting for the students who used to attend their lessons and rely on them to gain understanding of learning and of religion.

I could not have imagined that such a thing could ever befall al-Azhar, for I believed that al-Azhar's standing in matters of religion would forever protect it from such vile injustice, from such momentous events. But the days of Sidqi Pasha insisted on showing us everything, on forcing history to record what it had never been accustomed to recording since al-Azhar's founding, and on establishing that more than seventy scholars were seized on mere suspicion, punished on mere conjecture, men who had once lived in safety and peace of mind, suddenly thrust in a brief moment into anxiety and fear.

Nor could I have imagined that the scholars of al-Azhar would lose that fellow-feeling and mutual compassion which men of religion ought never to lose among themselves — that renunciation of wrong, that repudiation of injustice, that standing firm against aggression. But it seems the harshness of Sidqi Pasha's rule, the severity of his judgment, and these many shades of violence that enveloped everyone and everything proved stronger than the bonds of fellow-feeling among men of religion; they drove this vast number out of al-Azhar and into the street, and not a single scholar of al-Azhar spoke out in protest, not one tongue among them so much as voiced an objection. Most likely, many of them kept their distance from these wronged men, fearing lest they themselves be suspected, or thought ill of, or struck by the same injustice and oppression that struck these others.

And so corruption reached its furthest extent, and evil reached its utmost limit, in these days when violent injustice occurs precisely where injustice ought never to occur — and when it does occur, no one condemns it; rather, everyone submits to it, everyone fears it, and even those who ought to be advocates for justice and defenders of what is right become instead fearful and apprehensive, imploring God to turn evil away from them, to ward off harm from them, and to be gentle with them in His judgment.

Weakness can sink no lower than this. No hope can be placed in men who arrive, through weakness, at such a state. No good can be expected from men who meet evil in this fashion.

No reform can be hoped for from men so thoroughly at ease with corruption of this kind. And yet, for all that, these scholars, numbering more than seventy, who have borne this injustice patiently for three years, believe that God's justice will come to pass, and that it is near — and we, too, believe with them, with the truest faith, that God's justice will come to pass, that it is near, and that it will restore to them their due — though not at the hands of the men of al-Azhar, but at the hands of other men entirely.