

The People Have Rights That Must Be Rendered to Them

Al-Musawwar, 22 November 1940.

My friend said: I came seeking rest from the weariness of work, to divert my soul a little from life's cares, and to wash my heart clean of civilization's grime — that grime which clings to people's way of life as they struggle to satisfy their needs, fulfill their purposes, and discharge their obligations — and I thought a few hours in this beautiful setting would bring me all of that which I sought.

And why not? Everything here invites the body's rest, the soul's innocence, the heart's purity, and the conscience's clarity — an atmosphere all clear and bright, across which, from time to time, small scattered clouds drift, never veiling the sun but refining its light and tempering whatever in its heat might otherwise harm the body.

And a calm, gentle breeze stirs lightly through this air, rousing in the body a mild vigor, and rousing in the soul a calm, reassured life, which, if it calls to anything, calls only to calm and reassured conversation, and to slow, companionable reflection — and towering palms pleasant to look upon, having shed their fruit just as they were pleasant to look upon when laden with it.

And ancient ruins, scattered with various relics, over which long ages have passed, destroying some of them and sparing others, with scholars' work in uncovering these relics and extracting whatever of them lies buried in the earth still scant — these ruins stir in the soul a lesson and an admonition, stir in it reverence and wonder, stir in it contentment and reassurance, and stir in it, alongside all of this, a little sorrow and a great deal of longing.

And groups of foreigners, civilian and military, had come to visit these relics, or had made the visiting of these relics an occasion for seeking the rest I myself was seeking, or the amusement I was not — scattered in any case around these relics and among them, calling to one another, answering one another, laughing together, each distracting the other with glance and word, and with gesture and movement beyond glance and word.

How beautiful is this setting, and how fitting that it should grant my soul the rest it sought, and restore to it the vigor it had lost; how fitting that it should calm this troubled heart, quiet this restless soul, and prepare me well for my work, sending me back to it, as the ancient poet said, firm of insight and sturdy of step.

But I return to the city just as I left it, my soul still heavy with cares, my heart still brimming with sorrows, straitened by life and the living, weary of life and all its vitality, my heart's gloom not lifted, my soul's cares not dispelled, my conscience not reaching the clarity and purity I had hoped for — pale and despondent instead, as though the fading evening light had cast upon it its own creeping gloom and pallor, as though these shadows had already surrounded it, sending out their vanguard to erase, little by little, the bright sign of day from the earth, and to spread over it, little by little, the dark sign of night.

I said to my friend: I have discovered today, for the first time, that you are a poet — what is the matter? My friend said: I do not know, but I found myself preoccupied with the people of this setting rather than with the setting itself, and I saw, in the condition of these people who live in this setting, what those fine gentlemen who had come seeking rest, and pleasure, and life's bounty, did not see.

I said to my friend: But you see these people every day, and you see them everywhere — you had no need to leave Cairo to see something of people's condition, whether it pleases you or saddens you; for in Cairo too there is something of people's condition that pleases, however little, and something that saddens, however much. So why has what you see of people's condition now distressed you, when it did not distress you yesterday, and will very likely not distress you tomorrow?

My friend said: Because yesterday I was preoccupied, away from these people, with the affairs of life that concern me, and tomorrow I shall again be preoccupied, away from them, with the same — but today I left Cairo wishing to have some leisure for myself; and these people came between me and myself, so that I was preoccupied with them instead of with myself, turned away from myself toward them, and spent hours I had expected would prove sweet, clear, and pleasant, only to find them instead the bitterest of bitter, the murkiest of murky, the most injurious of injurious.

I said to my friend: Then you are in urgent need of leaving Cairo from time to time, seeking leisure for yourself, only to have people's

condition come between you and yourself, so that you are forced to think of them, concern yourself with them, and speak of them. Perhaps all of this will move some of your friends to follow your own path, walk your own course, think of these people's condition, and devote to them some measure of attention.

For how badly they need some extra measure of care, and a little thought given to them, and how stingy we are toward them with the care and thought that is their due — and this thing you tell me of is neither novel nor strange; it reminds me now of the way of many people of Cairo and Alexandria, those whom the portents of war disturbed out of Cairo and Alexandria, so that they emigrated to the countryside and tried to settle there, only then to emigrate back from the countryside, preferring Cairo and Alexandria, with all the war's portents abroad in them, and whatever horror of war might yet befall them, over continuing to reside in that countryside — preferring this because they saw what they had never imagined they would see, and felt what they had never supposed they would feel, and because, before all else and after all else, they found themselves deprived of what they had never expected to be deprived of.

Did not one of them tell al-Muqattam some months ago that he preferred returning to Cairo over residing in the countryside, because he had not found among the country folk what he was accustomed to finding in the capital of life's good things? And al-Muqattam published his account at length, in a manner truly both comic and genuinely painful. And what do you make of a man who prefers the portents of war and its horrors to the buzzing and biting of mosquitoes in the countryside, and what do you make of a man who could not bear to go without what he was accustomed to enjoying in Cairo — the pleasures of food and drink, and that luxury the wealthy find when they settle into their houses and retire to their beds, and when they stroll about those clean, beautiful streets, so full of activity and of whatever fills the soul with delight and joy?

What do you make of a man who says all this, and is content to have it reported of him, and lets it all be broadcast, forgetting only one single thing — which seems, apparently, quite forgettable — namely, that in this very countryside there are millions of Egyptians offering their own coarse, rough bodies as pasture to the mosquitoes, and deprived — I do not say of life's soft comforts and tender pleasures, but of the very things that make life life at all — deprived of what sustains the frame and quenches the thirst, and what allows a human being to feel himself human, able, from time to time, to have leisure for himself, and to think,

from time to time, about himself.

And yet they do not emigrate from the countryside, nor do they chafe against life there, but remain in the countryside, whether content with it or resentful of it, submitting in any case to God's decree — whereas you, my friend, are like those who never knew the countryside and its sufferings until the war disturbed them out of the cities; and once they tasted something of the pain in country life, they could neither bear to stay nor settle there.

And the strangest and most curious thing of all is that these fine gentlemen, who had come to the countryside and then turned away from it, never once thought of the country folk themselves, but thought only of themselves; they did not grieve for the country folk, but were concerned only for themselves, and so fled with themselves back to the cities, where they could find whatever they could not do without of life's comforts.

My friend said: And stranger and more curious still is that these fine gentlemen never once considered that they owe their own happiness to the misery of the country folk, owe their own luxury to the hardship of the country folk, and owe their own fullness and quenched thirst to the hunger and thirst the country folk endure. They thought of none of this, not even a part of it, but thought only of themselves, preoccupied only with what they themselves had been deprived of, of life's pleasures and comforts; and so they hurried back to the cities, and no sooner had they found again what they had lost than they forgot the countryside and its people altogether, and gave themselves over to their contented, comfortable life, enjoying it, passing their days in it, remembering no one and nothing — as though they had seen no one and nothing, as though they had never witnessed in the countryside a misery that would make an honorable man ashamed, when he sees it, to go on savoring the taste of ease. God have mercy on Abu al-'Ala, when he said:

Had I alone been granted eternal life, I would not have loved eternity in solitude; let no clouds rain down on me or on my land, unless they spread their rain evenly over every land.

I said to my friend: And why would you wish them to remember this and reflect upon it, when, if they did remember it, it would pain them — and why should they be pained? And what value has life, if pain spreads through it? And if this were to pain them, that pain might spoil their own pleasures for them, and they have no wish to have their pleasures spoiled. And what value have pleasures, if they are not pleasures entire

and unmixed?

And were their pleasures indeed spoiled for them, they might find relief for themselves by rendering to the country folk some of their due, and lifting from them some of their misery — though this might cost them some surplus of money, and might cost them some measure of effort; and they did not amass their money in order to spend it on anyone but themselves, nor did they possess their own effort in order to expend it on anything but their own needs and purposes. And what value have money and effort, if spent on anything other than what secures their owner some pleasure, or fulfills for their owner some desire?

My friend said: You think too ill of people — you yourself know there are generous men among them who do good and dispense kindness. I said: Then examine these generous men, and weigh their number against the number of the wretched; weigh what they give and do against Egypt's need for giving and doing; and weigh, in particular, what they give and do against their own capacity to give and do — and the reckoning will show you that I do not think ill of people, but am simply stating facts that admit neither doubt nor dispute.

And the most evident of these facts is that those capable of doing good in Egypt may well be rich in wealth, power, and standing, but are truly poor in any sense of social solidarity, and in whatever ought to exist among the sons of a single nation of mutual sympathy, mutual cooperation, mutual exhortation to good, and the exchange of kindness.

My friend said — and his quiet sorrow had by now turned into something close to fury — say what you like of those who are stingy and do not give, and of those who fall short though they are able to do good; for all you will have observed in them is a weakness of character, and a coolness in the love of good.

But I myself hold something harsher than that, and more severe, and more fitting to fill hearts with anger and fury. I said: And what is that? He said: Our democratic system, of which mouths are full of talk, and clubs full of debate, and newspapers full of defense, and over which the whole land stirs from time to time — whenever this or that chamber of parliament is elected, and whenever questions and interpellations are raised in this or that chamber of parliament — for this democratic system, like every other system of government, rests upon the principle that the people have duties they must discharge, and that the people have rights that must be rendered to them. And the first of these duties is to

supply the state with money by paying its taxes, and to protect the homeland's soil by offering up life and blood should it be endangered; and the first of these rights is that misery be lifted from the people, wherever the state can find a way to lift misery from the people.

Do you doubt that the people fall short in paying taxes and supplying the state with money? Do you doubt that the people would fall short, were the state to call on them to defend the homeland against an enemy's attack? Then do you believe the state has done everything it ought to do, or even some part of what it ought to do, to protect the people from misery and wretchedness?

And I was about to answer my friend in the state's defense, but he pressed on vehemently, saying: Spare yourself an effort beyond your strength — you saw with me those wretched people searching through what our own servants had thrown out as table-scrap after lunch, seeking in it something to swallow, that they might sustain themselves or find some pleasure in it. Spare yourself an effort beyond your strength — I will never believe that a country like Egypt, with its vast budget, is incapable of sparing some of the country folk the need to seek their sustenance and their pleasure in what is thrown out as table-scrap.

Only two weeks ago you were speaking of the people's right to education under a sound democratic order; speak now also of the people's right not to be driven by hunger and misery to what offends human dignity, under that same sound democratic order.

And the car had by now brought us, from Cairo, to the point where we could not avoid parting; my friend signaled to the driver to stop, and placed his hand in mine, saying: say something of this to whichever deputies you know, and to whichever senators you know.

I said, with something of a smile: Yes — I shall do so, once the president of the Chamber of Deputies and the bureau of the Chamber of Deputies are elected, and the bureau of the Senate as well. For only then will the senators and deputies be ready to listen to talk of this kind.