

From Afar ... Our Revolution (4)

Al-Jumhuriya, 1 August 1954.

In an earlier part of this discourse I expressed concern for our revolution over what the half-educated might suggest to it in the matters of reform it faces, and I should like to pause a little over these half-educated, to make clear who they are and what error they might entangle our revolution in.

It is quite clear that education is not among those things that can be defined by any kind of continuous or discrete quantity, as the ancient philosophers put it; it is not among the things that can be divided as numbers are divided, or as units are divided, and so it cannot be divided into halves, thirds, or quarters, because we know no whole of it upon which we could perform such division. God, mighty and exalted, has told us that above every possessor of knowledge there is one more knowing, and has told us that we have been given of knowledge only a little.

And since knowledge can neither be enclosed nor counted, and cannot for that reason be halved, thirded, or quartered, education, which is the reception of knowledge, likewise admits of no enclosing and no dividing. "The half-educated," then, is one of those expressions meant to convey something other than its precise meaning, and the half-educated man is one who has not taken from knowledge and culture what would set right his mind, his character, and his heart, and grant him sound judgment of things, accuracy in forming opinions of them, and patient deliberation in resolving whatever problems confront him; he has retained some things and let others slip from him, as Abu Nuwas said to al-Nazzam, and for this reason he pronounces upon what he cannot properly judge, lacking the tools that would let him rule rightly and speak accurately. The half-educated man may possess a great share of knowledge, may have encompassed many branches of learning, but his knowledge, for all its abundance, has not matured his mind, has not steadied his judgment, has not set right his character, has not reformed his heart; he is learned in one respect and ignorant in many others. God, mighty and exalted, has told us of those who were charged with the Torah and then did not bear it, likening them to the donkey that carries books; and the man who was charged with knowledge and then did not bear it, who memorized it and then did not benefit from it, did not take it to heart, and was not shaped in mind, heart, and character by it, is like

those who were charged with the Torah and then did not bear it. And say the same, by analogy, of those charged with the Qur'an who then did not bear it, and of everyone who came to know something, little or much, and then neither benefited from it himself nor benefited those around him with it.

And everything in modern life exposes people — "save those whom God has preserved from it" — to being like those who were charged with the Torah and then did not bear it, for whom God gave the parable of the donkey that carries books; for the means of knowledge have multiplied and been made easy in these days, until knowledge comes to be driven toward people without their seeking it, and carried to them without their troubling to pursue it, and perhaps poured into their heads without their willing or desiring it. These books that lay out the truths of knowledge and convey them to people in the simplest words, nearest to comprehension; these newspapers that greet people morning and evening with chapters on science, literature, philosophy, and economics — have made it all easy for them, bringing it near to their minds. And this radio, which casts into people's ears, morning and evening, at work and at leisure, whatever God wills of the varieties of knowledge. All these means have cast into the minds of many of our contemporaries the notion that knowledge is an easy thing, that man need not expend effort and bear hardship to win even a little of it. And people, for this reason, often look down upon those who devote their whole lives and all their efforts to research, study, and acquisition, seeing them as taking on burdens they have no need to take on.

And for this reason they look upon specialist scholars with glances full of pity and commiseration, and it may be cast into their minds that these scholars are some new breed, unlike other people who take things with ease and simplicity; and since knowledge is written out, made easy and simplified, in these volumes sold at prices no less easy than the knowledge itself, and since everyone reads these books and takes in from them what they take in, just as they read newspapers and listen to the radio, there is no harm in their accepting everything said to them, retaining what they can of it, and letting go what they cannot bear, confident that their knowledge will be renewed every day so long as they read the books that are published and the newspapers that circulate, and listen to the radio, willingly or unwillingly.

And so there has arisen in this modern age, thanks to the printing press and the means of publishing and broadcasting, an easy kind of

knowledge, but one distinguished not by ease alone, but by speed as well — speed in its production, speed in its comprehension, speed in its being forgotten. It scarcely reaches one ear before it passes out the other, as the common saying goes, and for this reason it is a fleeting knowledge, passing like a cloud, without leaving any weighty trace in the soul of the reader or listener. Yet at the same time it gives its reader or listener the illusion that he has read a great deal of knowledge and has become a cultured man able to wade into anything and pronounce upon anything, finding the solution to every problem and the way out of every predicament. And everything has a face of good and a face of evil: the facilitation of knowledge and its being brought within reach of many people is a good thing, for it carries knowledge, in all its varieties, to classes of people who had never had the chance to taste knowledge, and who have every right to learn and to be cultured, and the little they learn by these easy means is better than the unbroken darkness of ignorance; but at the same time it drives many people to vanity, misleads them about their own true selves, and gives them the illusion that they have attained a knowledge they have not in fact attained. And this is a source of much evil in general human life, and in a country like Egypt it is a danger indeed to this general life; for alongside this abundant, easy knowledge there ought to exist another, difficult kind of knowledge, attained only through effort, toil, the bearing of hardship, and the undertaking of exertion, and which, for that reason, only a few people attain — those who devote themselves wholly to it if they are able, or who struggle to find the time for it if such devotion is not made easy for them. And the state ought to listen to the possessors of this difficult knowledge more than it listens to the possessors of the easy knowledge, and this is precisely what distinguishes Europe and America, on the one hand, from Egypt and similar countries, on the other; for it is enough for the common people in Europe and America to form the public opinion by which rulers are guided in matters of politics and in the ordering of social life. And this is no small thing — indeed it is the best that humanity has managed to achieve of the peoples' liberation in the modern age — but the European and American governments, when they face a problem of political, administrative, or social life, do not consult, in solving it, those who acquire their knowledge from easy books, abundant newspapers, and the radio, but rather consult other people — those who devoted themselves to knowledge of their own accord, or were helped to devote themselves to it, and so excelled in it, then added to it, and then reconciled it with the circumstances of life and the interests of people around them.

And what is more dangerous than that a problem among people's problems should arise, and that its solution be suggested by readers of newspapers and easy books, and by that class of people who have known some things and let others slip from them, who have retained knowledge in their heads without its reaching their hearts or setting right their morals, and who have retained knowledge and then taken it up as a trade by which to console people about themselves, and to deceive, by means of it, whoever wishes and whoever does not wish to be deceived, whoever can be deceived and whoever cannot?

All of these are half-educated people, and it is they for whom I feel the deepest concern on behalf of our revolution; some of them have acquired of knowledge only its easiest and lightest portion, and some of them have acquired a great deal of knowledge but have educated only their minds and their tongues, not their hearts and consciences, and some of them have made a mockery of both knowledge and people, thinking more of themselves than of their knowledge, and more of themselves than of other people. He is not faithful to the knowledge he has absorbed, because he takes it as a means to his own immediate benefit, nor is he faithful to those who have entrusted him with their confidence, because he takes his knowledge as a means of making attractive to them what suits his own benefit, not what suits theirs.

God has told us of a people who read His word and then distorted it after they had understood it, and how many are those who now read the word of God and the word of scholars and then distort it after they have understood it, because their own private interests require this distortion, and they are weak before their own interests while being strong against the interests of other people.

And I bear witness that I have seen in Egypt people who detested certain systems most intensely, who were most deeply vexed by them, and who complained of them most bitterly, but who, once granted the chance to take up some share of public responsibility, came to love what they had once detested, and made others love it too, adorning it in their hearts, and recommending it to themselves and to those who attached themselves to them — for no reason except that they had been truthful with themselves and with others while they bore no responsibility, but once they became responsible, they lied to themselves and lied to others, because their own immediate interest had become dearer to them than the truth, and dearer to them than the interests of other people.

These are half-educated people — not because they retained half of knowledge, or retained some of it and forgot the rest, but because, though they retained a great deal of knowledge and encompassed much learning, knowledge did not take hold of them as they had taken hold of it. Their minds and their tongues were educated, while their hearts and their consciences remained ignorant, so that they became fit only to serve themselves, and came to need the strictest supervision when serving themselves, because they are liable to sacrifice the public interest for the sake of their private interest. These are the many varieties of the half-educated: those who snatched at knowledge without putting it fully to death through research and study, those who mastered part of knowledge while remaining ignorant of another part, and those who learned a great deal, yet whose knowledge never reached their hearts and their consciences.

All of these are an evil against which the revolution ought to guard most vigilantly; some of them offer counsel though they have no right to counsel, because they have no proper mastery of the knowledge on which they are consulted; some of them offer counsel outside whatever area of life's affairs they have in fact mastered; and some of them deserve neither to counsel nor to be consulted at all, because they are themselves astray and lead others astray, having made their own caprice their god, taken their own benefit as their goal, and made the world and all that is in it and all who are in it a mere means to that goal. It used to be said that the counselor is one entrusted with confidence, and it is the right of whoever seeks counsel to investigate, inquire, and verify when choosing his counselors.

And I have no doubt that among the most difficult and arduous of things is the selection of the trustworthy, and the singling out of men of sound judgment on whose discretion and candor, on whose sincere counsel, on whose good conduct of affairs, and on whose capacity to bear heavy burdens, one can rely. And from this it would be a most grievous injustice to blame rulers for failing to choose their counselors well, for rulers are not able to read hearts, nor to probe the depths of consciences, and how many are those one meets and comes to admire, until that admiration takes hold of both mind and heart together, and one then comes to trust them, and then entrusts to them what one entrusts to oneself, or what one fears even to entrust to oneself — until, when the moment of truth comes and matters are laid bare, one looks and finds that one has placed trust where there was none to be placed, has sought

safety where there was none to be found, and has rested easy with one who ought rather to have been feared. And it was for good reason that Ziyad said to his subjects: "We ask God to help each of us bear with the other." We ask God to help the governed bear with their rulers when they are harsh, whether rightly or mistakenly, and to help the rulers bear with the governed, whether they are pleased or displeased, and whether, when they offer counsel, they counsel sincerely or deceitfully.

Be that as it may, we have been commanded to speak the truth, and to counsel what we believe to be good. And the whole of the good lies in the revolution's guarding itself most strictly and most severely when it seeks counsel and when it enlists, to help it bear the burdens of government, those capable of giving it aid. For if it is a man's duty to verify and take precaution when he seeks counsel in his own private affairs, how much more is it his duty to verify most thoroughly and take the utmost precaution when he seeks counsel not for the affairs of one contemporary generation, but for the affairs of a generation that generations yet to come will follow.