

Salah ...

Al-Jumhuriya, 20 February 1962.

*Upon you be the peace of God, Qays ibn 'Asim, and His mercy, for as long
as mercy pleases to be shown —
for Qays was no mere dominion of a single man, but the whole edifice of a
people, now fallen into ruin.*

Yes indeed — for Salah was a pillar among the pillars of the revolution that transformed the life of this nation and granted it a new life founded upon freedom, independence, justice, and the realization of dignity for this people as a whole and for every one of its sons. He gave to this revolution the utmost of his effort and the most sincere of his struggle, and was, like his comrades, prepared with the truest readiness to give up his life for its sake, while at the same time serving as the mainstay of his family, which has been struck through him by the greatest and harshest of calamities. He was, moreover, the editor-in-chief of this now-orphaned newspaper, which has been struck by catastrophe in him. No one bore its burdens more diligently, knew its rights more thoroughly, or was more zealous for its advancement and progress, in keeping with what serious and sincere newspapers ought to do in the service of the homeland and in making the people aware of their rights and their duties.

For this loss is not the loss of one man, nor the loss of a few men; it is not a single people's edifice collapsing, but rather the edifice of whole communities struck by tragedy in him, at a moment when they had placed in him the broadest of hopes and expected from him the greatest of deeds. Then one day they found him snatched away from them, torn from them, at the very moment they were most eager for his swift recovery and for health to be restored to him in full, so that he might resume his fruitful activity in the service of his homeland and his revolution, in the care of his family, and in leading his newspaper to the utmost success that could be hoped for it and the greatest discharge that could be expected of it of the duties of a free press, one that confines all its efforts to the service of the homeland and its citizens and to spreading the principles, truths, and aims of the revolution among every class of the people, falling short in none of this and fearing no reproach for it.

Had Salah been among those advanced in years, who had paid life its due and taken their share of it, the loss in him would still have been grave. But there would then have been some path left open to the heart for consolation. Instead, he was snatched away in the very flower of his youth, after having discharged his duty as even elders do not discharge it. And it was only fitting that we should have expected much, very much, from him; for a man who began his life as Salah began his — struggling with the truest and most valiant struggle, in peace and in war alike, devoted with the deepest and most sincere devotion to his homeland in times of hardship and times of ease, in days of misery and days of plenty, a man whose strong soul never found a path for weakness to enter it, whose great heart never found a way for despair to reach it, and whose deep and powerful devotion to his homeland and his nation self-interest could never, for a single moment of his life, taint — such a man, having begun his life in this manner, deserves that we should expect of him far more still than what he had already begun with. But people merely estimate, while the decree of God proceeds among them, decisive and final, with nothing to turn it back or avert it.

And so the news of the death of this great revolutionary, this noble friend, this great citizen, fell like a thunderbolt upon those who knew him closely and upon those who knew him only from afar.

And I came to know Salah Salem as all Egyptians came to know him afterward: when the revolution first blazed up, he was one of its blazing embers, growing ever brighter with each passing day, and one of its unrestrained tongues, growing ever bolder with each passing day in speaking of whatever was sweet and whatever was bitter, whatever was unwelcome and whatever brought joy.

And he was among the most brilliant orators of the revolution in bringing hopes close to people's hearts, in reviving hope in their souls, and in kindling the fire of revolution in their consciences; his seriousness was bitter in the extreme, and his wit was sweet to the utmost degree of sweetness, and he was the most brilliant of his comrades in mocking the old order and in provoking laughter at the politicians of that order. His seriousness was stern in its bitterness, and his humor was cruel in its sweetness, and he was most provocative of mirth and laughter when he toyed with the politicians of the past era, mimicking some of them to splendid effect and portraying others with faithful accuracy.

At the same time, he could be fearsome, provoking fear and terror, when he would warn those who turned their backs on the revolution and threaten them with the harshest and most violent of threats; and throughout all this, he was a motion that knew no stillness, an energy that knew no calm, and an impetuosity that knew no patience. You might see him in Cairo in the morning and in the Sudan by evening, and you might see him journeying through the Arab countries, portraying their people, upon his return to his homeland, and portraying their political leaders, with the most brilliant and the most faithful of portrayals. This image of him was etched in my mind, and I was never granted the chance to meet him except toward the very end, when, on that day, I came to know him closely and discovered in him devotion to his work carried to its utmost limit, and loyalty like the deepest love, and I discovered in him a generous disposition, a gentle character, a pure conscience, a preference for frankness above all else, and a strong aversion to evasion and to crookedness in word and deed. And I discovered in him the most solicitous of chiefs toward his colleagues who worked with him at the newspaper, firm with them when firmness was called for, and gentle and kind to them when gentleness and kindness were welcome.

I have never known an editor of a newspaper who gave it the very essence of his soul, the sincerest of his effort, and the utmost of his energy, as Salah gave all of this to Al-Jumhuriya.

And I saw him ill, with his illness reaching its utmost severity, yet never, on a single day, was he able to let it make him forget Al-Jumhuriya, or to turn him away from thinking of it, caring for it, and inquiring about its affairs both small and great; he was gentle with all his colleagues, and granted himself the smallest share of that gentleness.

And illness did not overtake me as it overtook him, so that I neither met him nor he me; he grew too weary to come to me, and I grew too weak to go to him, and my last encounter with him was his farewell when I sailed to Europe; and I returned to Egypt only to find that he had already journeyed far away to America; then illness overtook me again, grew severe and harsh, and stood between me and meeting him when he returned from America ill, just as he had set out for it ill. And I lived, as all his colleagues and friends lived, reassured by hope, clinging to expectation, confident that his youth would prove stronger than the illness and its weight.

And one morning my companion was reading to me the morning papers, or reading to me whatever he chose to read from them, but he avoided Al-Jumhuriya; and when I asked him about it, a great hesitation and a profound confusion overtook him, until at last he was compelled to tell me the truth, having tried at first to hide it from me, informing me of this grave calamity and this great affliction, informing me that Salah had been snatched away by death.

And upon hearing this news, a stupor overtook me, whose beginning I knew well but whose end I do not know even now, as I dictate this account after night has fallen, without having found any end to this stupor; for I can scarcely bring myself to believe that this vigorous life has ebbed away, and that this flourishing youth — unclaimed by him, and unable to turn back the decree of God once it has run its course — can do nothing but be struck with dread and anguish, and fill his heart with sorrow and flood his soul with grief to no avail, until, once the stupor has lifted from him and the shock has fallen silent and he has returned to himself, or his self has returned to him, he finds no choice but to acknowledge that death is true, that the decree of God comes to pass, and that the will of God prevails, and can do nothing but beseech God, from the depths of his soul, to envelop the noble departed in His mercy, to lavish upon him His grace and His good pleasure, and to grant a fitting consolation to the homeland and its citizens, to his grief-stricken family, to his now-orphaned newspaper, and to his friends and colleagues, who share in this calamity.