A Word

By Dr. Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

A well-known French writer once went to one of those luxurious towns where the rich flock in summer to "take the waters" — to cure the ailments that luxury itself breeds in the pampered, or to feign recovery for form's sake. For indeed, the man of means must needs have some ailment, however slight — something to give him an air of melancholy, to make him appear one of those whom sickness deprives of sleep, poisons their days, and makes them weary of life's pleasures, out of pity for their fragile selves. It would be unseemly for a man of luxury to appear robust and vigorous, to throw himself into life's business with the earnestness of those who must work to live. Nor is it fitting that he should appear openly cheerful, basking in the health and comfort that wealth affords, lest he draw envy from the envious or longing from the deprived. No, he owes it to his station to seem preoccupied, to let his heart be burdened, his body frail — so that others may pity him, excuse his excesses, and think twice before envying the leisure that weighs so heavily upon him.

This French writer, then, went to one of those elegant spa towns in the French mountains that summer. I do not know whether he went seeking health — as the rich often do — or simply to escape the heat, or perhaps in search of inspiration for a story or a book. A true craftsman of letters finds material for creation wherever he can. And this particular writer had already depicted many worlds: the world of the poor whose misery corrupts their morals; the poor whose hardship is harsh but not dishonorable; the toiling laborers; the frivolous middle classes who waste themselves in idle pleasures. Why should he not now turn to the decadent world of the idle rich — those whose indulgence has made them sick, or who pretend to sickness, who spend their days in vapid leisure, and their nights in sin, debauchery, wine, and gambling, staggering home only when dawn chases away the darkness?

He had scarcely arrived and observed this world of the pampered before disgust seized him. He recorded that disgust in a short piece that appeared in a magazine — it angered some, but amused many. He said to one of his friends:

"It is enough to look at the faces of the wealthy to know that God Almighty despises wealth and luxury to the utmost degree. For had He not, He would never have set wealth and luxury upon such ugly, hideous faces."

I do not know whether the faces of those wealthy spa-goers were indeed as ugly as he described. But his words set many thoughts stirring in me. I laughed as others did — yet his jest left me pondering. It matters little to me whether the faces of the idle rich are fair or foul, smooth or drawn. What truly matters — and what I suspect mattered to this French writer as well — is not their appearance but their conscience. Is it content or tormented? At peace or in turmoil? Does it smile or frown? Is it weary or at ease?

How, I ask, can the conscience of a free man rest easy when its owner wallows in pleasure to the point of destruction, while those around him drown in misery and want? How can it be calm when its owner holds wealth so vast he can spend without counting, while countless others cannot earn enough to keep hunger and hardship from their door? How can it smile when he squanders on trivial amusements what might feed and clothe whole families who go to bed not knowing how they will greet the morning?

And how can it ever know rest, when its owner lives free from toil or strain, while those around him never know a day without labor, anxiety, or fatigue? When will the poor man find one day in the year to rest, one hour free from the sting of need or the ache of exhaustion?

No, I cannot see how the conscience of a free man can ever find peace, joy, or contentment while surrounded by such suffering. Those faces the French writer saw — hideous, as he called them — must indeed have drawn their ugliness from the corruption within.

Whatever its source, wealth imposes a moral duty. The free man must feel, deep within, the bond of human solidarity that joins him to others. For it is they — the workers, the poor, the humble — who sustain his comfort and defend his fortune when danger strikes. Nations do not conscript only the rich when enemies attack; they conscript all who can bear arms. Yet how often do the rich contrive to escape the burdens of defense, leaving it to the poor, who see in such sacrifice not a burden but a duty?

The state does not draw its policemen and guards from among the wealthy, whose ease makes them unfit for vigilance; it draws them from those who possess no wealth to lull them into apathy. The rich man's lands, factories, and investments — all are sustained by the labor of others who toil so that he may live in comfort, while they subsist on the barest means.

I have never boarded a train or ship, never enjoyed comfort in travel, without my thoughts turning to those who operate the train or steer the ship — those who labor to make my ease possible. I have never rested in a hotel or my home without thinking of the hands that provide that comfort, unseen. They work that I may rest; they sweat that I may be cool; they smile that I may taste a little happiness.

How often have we read in books, heard from sages and philosophers, and repeated in classrooms that "all men need one another." Yet how swiftly such words fade from our minds! How few truly let that truth take root in their hearts — that social solidarity is not a moral ornament but a necessity of life itself. Only those who live by that conviction in heart and deed can claim a clean conscience.

Let the rich man's face be handsome or ugly, bright or dark — it matters little. What matters is this: his conscience will never be serene or pure unless he fulfils his duty to others. He must spread satisfaction before seeking his own, bring ease to others before taking his rest, share his wealth before basking in it.

All this came to my mind as I read that French writer's remark — and my thoughts wandered further still, to our own Egyptian Revolution: that long-voiced cry of the people, that long-demanded justice which at last began to find its path with resolve and courage, without hesitation or delay.

And I asked myself: will it be granted to me — and to others who have long called for true social solidarity — to see Egypt, before our time is done, become a land where this solidarity is real and untainted, pure of deceit and hypocrisy? Will we see an Egypt where the state gives every deprived man his due from every hoarder, every weak one his right from every strong, every wretched one his share from every fortunate?

Then shall the consciences of the rich be cleansed, for they will have paid what God commands from their wealth. They will sleep secure, their hearts at peace, fearing no envy nor injustice. Then shall the hearts of Egypt's sons be free of envy and rancor, for all will work and reap the fruit of their labor — none exploiting or oppressing another, none scheming or deceiving, but living as God

willed men to live: brothers, bound by affection, governed by justice, sheltered by peace and security.

If this hope be granted, it will be the sweetest of blessings;
But if not — then we have lived in its dream, and that, too, was joy enough.

— Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
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