Fortunes . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 3 June 1934

I have no wish to take up those fortunes which chance and circumstance distribute among people so strangely — raising up the obscure and casting down the distinguished, making the ignorant prosper and the learned suffer, setting the dull fool above others while returning the intelligent, sensible man to the place of the downtrodden and subdued.

These fortunes are well known; talk of them among people is tiresome, and belief in them widespread. Everyone dreads them and covets them alike; each wishes to be fortune's favorite, to be granted by luck whatever he desires and longs for. If fortune reaches him, he does not credit it, does not submit to it as such, but rather claims that he is the most capable of men, the cleverest of men, the most deserving of eminence, elevation, and prosperity. And if fortune does not reach him, he curses the world, curses circumstance, denies the fortunate any real merit, and pins on them every fault, whether real or imagined.

I have no wish to speak of those fortunes that touch people directly — speaking of them is pleasant enough in itself, but it has been said before. What I wish to speak of, instead, are other fortunes, ones I doubt would ever occur to you, ones I doubt you would ever hit upon or stumble across, however much you think and reckon, however much you turn over the affairs of the living and of things, through nights and days on end. For I mean to speak of the fortunes of boxes. You will be astonished at this word, and your astonishment will end in a measure of laughter, greater or lesser according to your readiness and the evenness of your temper as you read this article. But I am nonetheless resolved to speak to you of the fortunes of boxes. For there are boxes fortune favors, upon which the age smiles, whom the days make happy with support and aid, so that people do not draw near them, do not look at them, and do not speak of them except with caution and care, with reserve and deliberation, and with careful reckoning of every word they say. And there are other boxes which fortune disowns, from which the days turn away, upon which fate looks with something of mockery and disdain — so that people look at them with covetous eyes, draw near them as one who desires draws near, and stretch out their hands against them to smash and destroy. And I don't suppose you have yet understood what I mean to say — you are lost

in astonishment, and perhaps lost in laughter, and perhaps this long preamble irritates you, going on without ever reaching its point, so that you toss aside the paper and turn from reading this piece to reading something else less roundabout and rambling. But I assure you I mean neither to ramble nor to circle; I mean rather to speak of two boxes: one fortunate and blessed, the other wretched and stricken, both in Cairo, and both spoken of by people these days.

The first of them is the Public Debt Fund box; the second is the box of the old qibla in Al-Azhar the Noble. Have you now grasped what I mean? Do you now understand that among boxes there are some granted survival, and others condemned to extinction? As for the Public Debt Fund box, the Financial Committee of the Chamber of Deputies took it up in the course of studying the budget, and wrote, on it and on the funds it contains, a report that stands as a marvel among what committees write in the halls of Parliament — a marvel of boldness and hesitation together, a marvel of hope and despair together, a marvel of attack and retreat together, then a marvel of demand and refusal, a marvel of approach and rebuff, resembled or captured by nothing so well as Bashar's line about his beloved:

She turned away with one cheek, and bared the other,

then bent back again, like a soul recoiling.

Had you read this splendid report yourself, you would have found in it what I found delightful, and what alarmed me alarming too. For the Committee wishes to address the circumstances of the ongoing legal-political dispute over the question of the public debt, yet does not wish to address it from the legal angle, so that judicial matters remain safely sealed away, nor from the political angle, so that the negotiator may pursue the negotiations undisturbed and at ease; it wishes instead to address it from the general financial angle alone, and so it asks the government to pay in nothing but paper currency — and you may understand this as you like, or not understand it at all; it makes no real difference. You might say that the subject of the legal and political dispute is precisely what the Committee did address, namely the obligation to pay in paper rather than gold. That is true; but the Committee nonetheless did not address this dispute from the legal angle, nor from the political angle, but simply asked the government to pay in nothing but paper, whether the courts uphold this or not, and whether negotiations settle on it or not. The Committee, moreover, is uneasy with

the Public Debt Fund box itself, because its very existence does not suit Egyptian sovereignty, is incompatible with independence, and does not accord with our financial capacity or with our fulfillment of what debt we owe. And so the Committee wishes to call for its abolition, but takes the utmost care in doing so: it asks the government to prepare to negotiate on the matter, while at the same time asking the Chamber to approve its budget — thus abolishing it in word while preserving it in deed, tempting it along, courting it, egging it on, and calling for its support, with all the money it requires. Do you not see that this box is a fortunate one, blessed with good luck?!

So leave it to enjoy its happiness and good fortune, and turn instead to this other box, and your heart will fill with pity for it, tenderness toward it, and compassion for its plight. It has stood in this blessed spot for hundreds of years, eyes lifting to it filled with reverence and awe, minds pondering it filled with wonder, bewilderment, and astonishment; people of every kind gaze upon it and ask themselves what its story is, what its secret is, what it contains — and then this ancient thing, surrounded by blessing and majesty and reverence, answers them: within it lies a guarded secret, the very secret of Al-Azhar's glory and its eminence. Do not approach it, do not touch it — for if you do, you will utterly demolish Al-Azhar, utterly drive out its blessing, and erase every trace of the grandeur and majesty that surrounds it. Then this ancient thing goes on speaking, telling the people: do not ask about this box, nor about what it is made of; it is enough for you to know that among its parts is a piece of Noah's Ark, for your hearts to fill with love for it, and your souls with reverence. Then the ancient thing goes on to other tales you may read in books, and ask about from the elders of Al-Azhar, those whom modern learning has not corrupted, whom modern civilization has not changed, those whose hands never reach toward the ancient thing except to touch it in blessing and veneration. But now see what has befallen this box in these very days.

A scholar of antiquities — woe to ancient things from scholars of antiquities! — wished to expose its secret, tear away its veil, and ascertain its true nature, and the true nature of what it contains. No sooner did he ask than he was granted leave. No sooner had he asked than his destructive hand reached out to the blessed, noble, ancient box; it was removed from its place, then opened, and what it held was drawn out. And behold, it was pages of the Noble Qur'an, written in an ancient script. As for the pages, they will find their place in Al-Azhar's library; as

for the box, God alone knows where its material will end up; as for the old qibla, it will be stripped of its ornament; and as for Al-Azhar the Noble, its blessing will be torn away from it. Why? Because a scholar of antiquities wished to investigate and to learn, and to satisfy scholarship's need for inquiry and discovery. And because this noble, ancient box has had bad luck in these days, eyes were able to lift toward it with covetousness and greed, and hands were able to reach toward it to smash and to wreck. As for the Debt Fund box, treaties watch over it, and the protection of foreign powers safeguards it, so that no one can look at it, or covet it, or speak of it, or call for its abolition except by means that guarantee its survival — exactly as the Financial Committee did when it wrote its report to the Chamber of Deputies.

I see you grown sad, gloomy, downcast — though you were laughing at the start of this piece. Do you now, like me, mourn for the box of Al-Azhar the Noble, and envy, like me, the Debt Fund box? If that is indeed your state, then I have achieved what I set out to do!

How fitting it is to mourn the Al-Azhar box, and how fitting to envy the Debt box. Fortune turns in cycles — and God does not turn it only among people, but among boxes as well.

[Taha Hussein]

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 3 June 1934.