# From Feast-Day Conversations

*Al-Risala, 22 January 1934*

The morning smiled, and the lips smiled with it; the sun shone forth, and the faces shone with it; the birds sang, and souls sang with them, of hopes and wishes, of passions and desires; and other souls sang too, of stinging sorrows, of searing pains, of feelings that break hearts and pour forth tears. Some people surrendered themselves to broad delight, others surrendered themselves to deep grief, and others still wavered between the two, taking a measured share of each, and composing for themselves out of both a temper neither radiant with joy nor dark with gloom, but something between the two, in which there was room for pleasure and hope, and room too for pain and memory. And on the days of the feast, people moved unsettled between the houses of the living and the houses of the dead, speaking to the one, and thinking of the other.

Much of what the living say, and much of what they say of the dead, deserves to be recorded and made the subject of various forms of literature and art. But this talk arrives with the days of the feast, and departs with them, as though it had never been; it leaves its traces upon people’s souls, but leaves no trace in what they compose and write, for they neither compose nor write; and if they do compose or write, they rarely dwell upon what they actually feel or find, but seek their subjects in the sky at times, in the clouds at times, and far from their own lives at times. And if they do touch upon their own lives, they touch only the surface of them, and touch it so gently that it comes nearer to a barren, hopeless dryness than to that fruitfulness which gives life to souls and nourishes hearts.

As for myself, I found myself, during the days of the feast, holding various conversations with myself and with my friends—some smiling, some scowling, some earnest, some jesting. But I kept for myself the bitterest and most stinging of these conversations, for I know that people, on the days of the feast and on other days alike, detest the bitterness of grief and the sting of pain. And I confess: I met the day of the feast with a deep sorrow, for I called to mind images I have grown accustomed to summon whenever the feast days come round, and thought of those I would visit and who would visit me, of those to whom I would go and who would come to me—only to find that many of these images had already been effaced from the page of life, leaving nothing behind but an outline

upon the page of the heart: vivid for some, faint for others.

These images have been effaced from the page of life, so I shall not seek out those they belonged to, nor will those they belonged to seek me out—either because they have been transported from this house, in which we struggle between pain and hope, to another house that knows neither motion nor struggle; or because they still struggle alongside us in this house, but the circumstances of life and the demands of living have carried their affections away from us, toward other people who are no longer of us, nor we now of them, in any way at all.

I used to begin my feast-day visits with this small company of dear friends: I would spend the eve of the feast with them, and when morning drew breath I would think of them, and when the forenoon rose I would set out to them, and meet them as though we had not met in a long age, and spend with them a brief, cramped hour, in which I had no leisure for them, nor they for me, so many were the comers and goers—yet it was, for all that, a broad and fruitful hour, so full was it of that affection which passes into your heart, soothing and sweet, for no reason but that hand had clasped hand, and that a calm greeting, innocent of all affectation, had touched the ear and filled the soul with life, delight, and joy.

And when I had spent this brief, fruitful moment with these friends, I would leave them having stored up enough delight and happiness to help me bear the burdens of the feast, and go on to the house of Adly, then the house of Tharwat, then to the house of so-and-so and so-and-so. And the days went on snatching these people away, one by one, until I would visit these friends and spend with them whatever time I spent, then leave, and find myself heading instead to Kawkab al-Sharq—not to the house of Adly, nor the house of Tharwat, nor the house of so-and-so and so-and-so, among those I once loved to seek out, and rejoiced when they sought me, or sent me their greetings by post.

And I had scarcely made ready to go out on the day of the feast before those who bring such news would inform me that so-and-so, and so-and-so, and so-and-so among my friends had already come, and were waiting—some of them wishing to begin the feast by seeing me, for seeing me was the thing dearest to them on the day of the feast; others wishing to accompany me on my feast-day visits, for they found in this company a pleasure and an ease. But now I am told that other people have come, and are waiting; while those who once used to come and wait have ceased to come and ceased to wait, for a time—because they fear

events, dread circumstances, are wary of informers, and shrink from the ruler's anger, sparing themselves its risk. They are alive, but the circumstances of life have severed the bonds between them and me, just as the circumstances of death have severed the bonds between the dead and me.

Nor would the days of the feast pass without my visiting a certain house in one quarter of Cairo, where I would find the smile of a fresh flower, of tender youth, of life smiling upon life. But this feast has now passed, and I did not visit that house, for it is a house in mourning, keeping no feast, since its fresh flower has been uprooted from it, utterly uprooted, torn from it, utterly torn away, and carried off by the wind to where flowers are seen no more, and life no longer smiles upon life. I did not visit that house, did not enjoy that smile, did not hear that conversation; but God is my witness that I have spent the whole of this feast—and it appears I shall spend many long days more—with a certain voice echoing within my soul, harsh, rough, faltering, hopeless, as a certain note echoes within a long piece of music. And you ask me about this voice, which has echoed within me for months, and will echo within me for months and months, and years to come? It is the voice of that coffin, as its bearers came out from the prayer in one of Cairo's mosques, struggling to secure it upon one of the hearses, as it resisted them somewhat, then yielded and gave itself up to them. And there came a dull thud, like the slamming of a door, and the coffin came to rest, and a faint, thin whine rose in the square, then swelled and grew, and the car sped off like an arrow toward that place from which no one who comes to rest there ever returns. And we followed it, downcast, and returned downcast; and life took hold of us again, and its troubles stirred around us, and turned us away from ourselves and from other people—but that dry, rough, faltering voice returns to me from time to time, and reminds me of that heavy day on which I bore two dear departed to their rest, in less than two hours.

Of this, and things like it, I spoke to myself in the days of the feast; and if you were to ask me what I spoke of to other people, and what other people spoke of when we met, then—what wretchedness! What poverty! What misery! What barrenness of life, and what bankruptcy of the living! We spoke of the financial crisis; we spoke of politics; we spoke of the High Commissioner's dawn departure with the birds on the day of the feast, and of all the secrets and rumours, all the interpretation and speculation, that surrounded that departure of his.

Then we spoke of certain remarkable matters that had won people's attention, occupied the newspapers, and attracted the concern of the security forces: we spoke of that ring which so agitated the security forces, and on whose account an entire commercial house was shut down, and around which a long and painstaking investigation was conducted, with no Egyptian newspaper, Arabic or otherwise, allowing itself to overlook the matter or withhold the news from its readers; and then, on the day of the feast, people awoke to find the newspapers informing them that a lady had picked it up outside a school, taking its jewel for glass, not knowing it was a precious stone, and that the city of Cairo was in the greatest state of agitation over it, and that its value exceeded a thousand pounds.

And we spoke of that pin, lost by its owner, who could not find it, and was alarmed at its loss, and whose family nearly made of it a story like that of the ring—but a young man soon found it and returned it to its owner, so that the security forces were never troubled, the investigators had no need to exert themselves, and the newspapers did no more than report the news briefly and modestly, in some inconspicuous, unremarkable place. And we compared the story of the ring with the story of the pin, and the fortune of the ring with the fortune of the pin.

And I would say to my friends, as they smiled and laughed and philosophised: Gently, gentlemen—for had you asked that ring, or that pin, what history they know, and had the ring and the pin wished to tell you some part of what they know, you would not have smiled, nor laughed, nor drowned yourselves in philosophy to such a degree. For the value of the ring and the pin does not lie only in these pounds, exceeding a thousand, or numbering in the hundreds; their value lies, rather, in what they carry of memory, and what they picture of a life, and in this bond that connects them to hearts and souls.

A sly friend said:

"Then tell us, in turn, about that ring of yours, the one you lost—for it appears that you too once lost a ring, and that its affair rose up to the police, then descended to the newspapers, and then spread among the people."

I said:

"You speak of this ring in jest, as though belittling it and holding it in contempt—yet do you know that I grieved for it most deeply? Do you

know that it is no less significant, and perhaps more significant to me, than that ring and that pin? Do you know that it has left, in Egyptian public life, lasting traces? Through it, certain men became doctors; through it, others obtained their licentiate degrees; through it, a great deal of state business was conducted; and through it, the affairs of many professors and students were settled, for years on end. Tell me, then, where in all this lies the trace of that ring, or that pin, in the lives of Egyptians? And yet its value never reached a thousand pounds, nor a hundred, nor even ten pounds—God forgive me—indeed, its value never reached ten piastres at all; its value was a single piastre and a half, no more. I acquired it in a time when things were cheap, in an age when a single piastre could still buy us a great many wants and needs; I acquired it in Bab al-Khalq, coming out one day from Dar al-Kutub, when I was twenty-four years of age, and wished to travel to Europe—and this journey showed me that I was a person like any other, obliged to record my date of birth, know my own age, and reckon what deeds I would bring to my account. At that time I searched for my birth certificate, and it was lost, so I had my age established for me, having been ignorant of it until then; and at that time I was told: whoever performs a deed, or utters a word, is bound to see it through—and so I acquired this ring. It was made for me by a man who made rings, near the governorate building, and it crossed the sea with me, and accompanied me in France as a student, and accompanied me at the university as a professor, and worked alongside me in matters of state, and stood by me through affairs of state, and was a faithful friend. I do not know how I ever consented to part from it for a time, entrusting it to a friend of mine, until one day he came to tell me he had looked for it and could not find it. Then I grew impatient—impatient with it, impatient with people, impatient with the whole of life—for no short while. Then someone insisted the matter must be reported to the police, and it was reported to them, and it descended to the newspapers; but the police received the matter with a smile, and the newspapers reported it in jest, and my friends spoke of it for a while, in banter. Do you see, then, that the value of things differs, not according to their effects and their standing, but according to the standing of their owners? Had I been the Prime Minister, the policeman would not have smiled, and the newspapers would not have made light of it, because I had lost a ring—but I am not the Prime Minister, and so the policeman smiles, and does not stir a hand; the newspapers make light of it, and you jest, and these people jest along with you. Of this, and things like it, we spoke on the days of the feast.”