A Lesson

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 30 June 1934

A valuable, engaging lesson — one containing both gravity and levity, both counsel and mockery, both propriety and wit — and useful, in any case: a great many people will profit from it, far more than either you or I might suppose. This lesson had to be given to those who received it, now that hearts have grown corrupt, spirits have soured, and matters have grown confused for some people, so that immediate self-interest has come to override principle and conviction.

People may well be convinced of the truth and believe in it — yet need distracts them from it, and self-interest weans them off it; and so events do them a kindness whenever they remind them, from time to time, of what they had forgotten, and alert them, now and again, to what they had grown careless of, teaching them that falsehood may well persist a long while, but that its persistence, its settling firmly into the ground, does not make it true, nor does it allow people to reap from it any good or benefit.

Yes — it was indeed an eloquent, valuable, engaging lesson, the one delivered the day before yesterday, and it had to be delivered, for a portion of Egyptians were in need of hearing it, and they have now heard it, and their hearts grew troubled by it, their spirits shaken by it, and tears, so it is said, were shed by some of them. We do not know precisely who delivered this lesson, but we do know it was delivered in the Senate, and perhaps the law students were the very first to profit from it, and to take to heart the lessons and admonitions it contained.

It grieved them, the failure that befell them in their examinations — and it is only fair to say that such failure is painful, and that the examination system in our universities is harder, indeed, than it ought to be. It grieved them further that they were given no opportunity to sit the examination again at the very start of the next academic year — and it is only fair to say that denying them this opportunity is a painful thing, out of keeping with proper university practice. They complained of this harshness, protested this severity, appealed to the Minister, and the Minister showed them no mercy; they appealed to the press, and the press helped them however it could; they appealed to the deputies, who showed sympathy toward them, compassion for them, and support for them, growing genuinely passionate in the cause, working hard at that

passion, and preparing a draft bill which the ministry resisted fiercely, at great length, and by every twist and turn — but a majority of the deputies managed to hold their ground, and to push the bill through, since the ministry had not made it a matter of confidence.

When the bill passed the Chamber of Deputies, the students rejoiced and celebrated, believing they had achieved what they wanted, and won what they had hoped for. And why not? Here was a bill passed by the Chamber of Deputies, passed despite the ministry's resistance to it, however much the ministry disliked it. Was it not reasonable to expect that this bill would likewise pass the Senate, just as it had passed the Chamber of Deputies, and that the students would win, as the war correspondents like to say, all along the line — and that they might then devote themselves, for the rest of the summer, to study and review, so as to sit the examination at the start of autumn? But the students had forgotten that politics has its own arts, arts beyond their power to grasp, whose secrets remain hidden from them, and that the Minister of Traditions is far too strong to be defeated before the students, or before the deputies either.

And these arts revealed their secrets to the students the day before yesterday, laid bare before them all that they had concealed. The bill was referred to the Education Committee in the Senate — but the committee never examined it, because it never met, or because it was steered away from meeting. A group of the senators resolved to expedite consideration of the bill at their chamber's final sitting the day before yesterday, but a procedural objection was raised, and the bill was put into a deep sleep by it; and parliament completed its session and adjourned, the bill left hanging, life having crept into it only halfway, and stopping there — so that this bill could never quite stir, nor move, nor do the slightest good for those who had sought it and pinned their hopes on it.

And the students dispersed yesterday, in despair, after hope had filled their hearts with contentment, and expectation had filled their spirits with joy and delight. And the Minister of Traditions returned home, calm and at ease, scarcely giving another thought to the students, or the deputies, or the bill. The curtain fell, and everything grew quiet — except for these cries that despair sends up from the mouths of the students, weeping, complaining, crying out for help that never comes.

All this happened, and all of it is truly painful — and yet all of it is truly useful too. For had the students' cause mattered to the members of

parliament the way certain other matters matter to them — matters the ministry exerts itself to the utmost to see through, to shore up its own position — the Senate would never have adjourned before settling the matter swiftly, just as it settled, swiftly enough, the matter of the barrages, works that are not even wanted tomorrow or the day after, but only a year or two hence. And had the students' cause mattered to the members of parliament the way these matters the ministers guard so jealously matter to them, the senators would never have adjourned before guaranteeing the students what they wanted. But the students' cause is a light matter, after all — they are angry today, but they will be content tomorrow; they are grieved today, but they will be delighted tomorrow; they are despairing today, but they will forget their despair and desolation within a few days' time. The students' cause is, in any case, a lighter matter than the cause of ministers, or of the Dean — and the ministers do not want the bill to pass, and the Dean does not want the bill to pass, and it is said the University Council rejected this bill unanimously. And in the Senate there is gravity and dignity, sound judgement of affairs, and sound judgement, too, of people's proper stations — so there is no harm at all in its neglecting the cause of the young, in order to satisfy the elders among the ministers and the University men.

None of this is strange. What is truly strange is that false hopes should take such hold over the students' hearts, that they should sit expecting good fortune, and hoping for it, in an age when good fortune is not to be expected, nor is it right to hope for it at all. And here is where the true value of this eloquent lesson becomes clear: for the Senate said to the students, the day before yesterday: the opposition never lied to you, when they told you, at every moment and every opportunity, that you live in an age in which you ought not to expect any care for you, or any hearing given to you, or any concern for pleasing you — an age in which you ought to expect nothing but hardship, harshness, violence, and heavy toil. The opposition never lied to you, when they told you, at every turn, that those who tempt you with hopes, who beguile you with wishes, who make you imagine that they pity you, love you, and hold you dear, want nothing more than to say to you words that may sit pleasantly enough in the heart, but which, upon examination and scrutiny, achieve nothing at all, and prove nothing at all.

The opposition never lied to you, when they told you, at every moment, that your lot in this age must be, like the lot of the whole people,

one continuous trial and abiding hardship, and that your duty in this age must be, like the duty of the whole people, a patience that knows no impatience, an endurance that knows no weakness, a devotion to the homeland and a steadfastness under adversity that outweighs immediate self-interest, whatever that self-interest might be.

The Senate said to the students, the day before yesterday: here you are, having placed your hopes in the deputies — now despair of the senators as well. Here you are, having found the doors of hope thrown open before you — do not go through them; watch, instead, as they are slammed shut in your faces.

Return to the patience, the steadfastness, the despair of good fortune, in which you once lived — until God exchanges one age for another, until one people takes the place of another, until power passes from one set of hands to another, and the doors of hope are thrown open for the whole of Egypt, not for one faction of her sons at the expense of another. It grieves us deeply that the students should be saddened, that their hopes should be scattered to the wind, that a heavy burden of toil should be imposed upon them for yet another year — but many a sorrow carries consolation folded within it, and many a dark despair carries light and hope woven through its very folds. So let the students be patient, let them take this lesson to heart, and let them profit from it, useful as it is.

Taha Hussein