The Tight Garment

al-Musawwar, 9 January 1948

Our own Egyptian life is nothing so much as a tight, threadbare garment — one that fails to cover its own wearer's body entirely, and cannot withstand whatever movement or activity that wearer might attempt!

It is said the ancient Arab poet Durayd ibn al-Simma once passed by the ancient Arab poetess al-Khansa, and found her dressed plainly, having gone out to tend some mangy camels, smearing them with tar, entirely unconcerned with her own plain appearance — and yet, in the midst of this plainness, her own beauty showed through, and he was utterly captivated by her, driven to real distraction, and spoke these lines:

Greet Tumadir, and halt, my companions,
and stand still, for your standing still is enough for me.
Never have I seen, nor ever heard of,
anything like today's tar-smearer of mangy young she-camels.
Dressed plainly, her own beauty still shining through,
daubing the tar exactly where the sore skin shows.

I have never once met a foreigner, whether merely visiting Egypt or residing here, without his speaking to me of this country's own beauty, and the fascination it holds for mind and heart alike, and of this country's own poverty, and the misery within it, filling hearts with sorrow, pain, and pity... And I have never once heard this same account from foreigners — and how often I hear it, both in Egypt and beyond her borders! — without recalling this same story, the story of the beautiful al-Khansa, who went to tend her own camels' mange, and, in her own plainness, let her beauty show through, captivating that great ancient poet.

Egypt herself is al-Khansa, going about her own work in plain dress, her own beauty showing through — but something else shows through alongside this beauty: the real harm touching her own people, the misery and suffering pressing constantly upon them. The foreigners who marvel at Egypt's own beauty, and pity her own people's harm and misery, play the part of this same poet — except that al-Khansa revealed only her own beauty, stirring in her poet nothing but fascination and admiration,

whereas Egypt reveals both her beauty and her own flaws together, delighting and grieving at once, stirring admiration and pity together.

How often it strikes me, in these very days, that modern Egyptian life is nothing so much as a tight, threadbare garment, one that fails to cover its own wearer's body entirely, and cannot withstand whatever movement or activity that wearer might attempt — its wearer cannot stretch out a hand, cannot extend an arm, cannot make the slightest movement, without this part or that of his own garment tearing, and this part or that of his own body being exposed.

Such is modern Egyptian life: genuinely constricted, genuinely threadbare, imposed upon a great and noble country, one abundantly blessed with movement, vigour, and ambition.

What do you make, then, of a country never created for misery or poverty, but created, instead, for wealth and prosperity — her own flowing Nile bears witness to this, her own fertile soil bears witness to this — and yet whose own people go hungry, unclothed, and sick, with only the very few among them safe from the evils of hunger, nakedness, and illness? Does this not prove that Egypt's own material garment is too tight, far too tight, to properly clothe her, to cover whatever of her own body ought to remain covered, and to conceal whatever of her own harm ought to remain hidden?

Egypt is likewise a country never created for lowliness, for smallness, or for humiliation... Her own standing monuments, depicting a glorious history, bear witness to this; what generation after generation has said of Egypt, across every era, bears witness to this; her own retention of her identity, from the moment she first knew herself, and from the moment history first knew her, right up to today, despite the sheer abundance of trials, grievances, and calamities that have befallen her, bears witness to this. And yet she lives now a life entirely of lowliness, smallness, and humiliation: the foreigner occupies her own land, controls her own fate, and her own people are made to suffer indignity in their own homes, with no share of freedom, no portion of dignity, ruled by the cane, and intimidated by every variety of fear imaginable, and some you could never imagine.

Egypt is likewise a country never created for chaos, disorder, or corruption. She bears witness to this in having been first to devise systems of governance, and having lived under these same systems for century upon century upon century; other peoples, in ancient times,

learned from her their own systems of politics and society, and she stood among the countries of the earth least inclined toward the violence and disorder that corrupts order itself... And now she lives a life the very least one could say of is that it stands utterly remote from stability: all her own people indignant and anxious, some openly voicing their complaint, most keeping it to themselves, hidden away. Look, then, at the public utilities, and at the officials charged with them, and tell me — do you see order, calm, and stability, or do you see confusion, disorder, panic, and distress?

Egypt is likewise a country never created for ignorance. She bears witness to this in having been first to devise the arts and sciences, and in having safeguarded human civilization twice over: once under the Ptolemies, in ancient times, and once under the Mamluks, in the medieval era. Look at her now, then, and consider the number of her own people who can read and write, and consider these countless thousands of children and young people turned away from schools and educational institutes — because these same schools and institutes remain too limited on the one hand, and because education itself is sold for money, while most Egyptians have no money to give, on the other.

Search whatever aspect of Egyptian life you wish, and you will find a great, noble country, with a glorious past; her own people's hearts filled with vast hopes befitting that same glorious past — every one of them imagining Egypt's own future must be as glorious as Egypt's own past. And yet they never rise except to sit back down again, never grow active except to sink back into inactivity, never wake except to fall back asleep.

How, then, is all of this to be explained, first of all? And how is Egypt to emerge from all of this, second of all? The explanation is simple enough: Egypt is greater than her own people, and deserves, instead, to be inhabited by a generation genuinely capable of valuing her own rights, her own hopes, and her own history, and of aligning its own conduct with all of it.

Egypt is greater than her own people, and greater than this tight, threadbare garment imposed upon her, one covering only the smallest, slightest part of her own body — and scarcely even covering that small, slight part, so severe is the wear it has already suffered.

As for the path toward leading Egypt out of all of this, and restoring her to whatever life genuinely suits and accommodates her, that too is simple enough. And what could be simpler than removing a threadbare, tight garment, to put on, in its place, a new, ample, beautiful one?

This is a simple matter, entirely simple — needing nothing but to find this new garment. So when, or how, will Egypt finally be granted the chance to find this new, ample, beautiful garment?