

The Grand Theatre

Mesamarat al-Gayb, 13 January 1946

Here it is, opening today, Thursday, in London, to run for several weeks — having already opened this past April, in the city of San Francisco, where it ran for two months. This is the grandest theatre imaginable, in the most precise, most expansive sense of that word. It holds a great deal of gravity, since it touches the very future of all humanity, attempting to conceive of it, and depict it, in some fashion or another. And it holds a great deal of farce too, since man is, by his own nature, vain, attempting far more than he is genuinely capable of, exposing himself, in that same attempt, to every variety of confusion and error — sometimes genuinely amusing, sometimes genuinely tragic. And it holds a great deal of comedy besides, since those performing in it have arrived from nearly every corner of the earth, as delegates of the earth's own greatest peoples, each one carrying his own people's temperament first, and his own personal temperament second — or, if you prefer, say each one carries his own personal temperament first, and his own people's temperament second.

Whatever the case, they carry genuinely divergent temperaments, genuinely distinct from one another — and all of these divergent, distinct temperaments will agree and disagree, unite and divide, connect and separate; and from all their agreeing and disagreeing, their uniting and dividing, their connecting and separating, a great deal of gentle wit will arise, stirring a smile, and a great deal of genuine comedy, provoking real laughter, and a great deal of genuine gravity too, prompting real reflection.

Among the phenomena confirming Aristotle's own view that man is, by nature, a political animal, was the very fact that the entire population of a single city would gather to watch a performance in the theatre, or that their own representatives and elders would gather to conduct, among themselves, discussions of politics, administration, and legislation, or that delegates from the various cities of a single nation would gather to visit the temple of Apollo, or to watch, and take part in, the Olympic Games.

The gathering of delegates from the Arab tribes — to make pilgrimage to the House before Islam, or to buy and sell at the market of 'Ukaz — was itself another manifestation confirming exactly what

Aristotle used to say: that man is, by nature, a political animal.

Those who trace civilization's own social development — across every nation and people, every era and circumstance — become convinced, I believe, that humanity remains genuinely intent on proving itself a political animal by nature, in real need of cooperation and mutual support, first to survive at all, and second to advance, and advance civilization itself. But those who trace the social development of human life become equally convinced, I believe, that humanity remains genuinely savage by nature too — cooperating as far as cooperation allows, yet clashing as far as clashing allows, just as readily. Perhaps it never truly embraces cooperation, nor genuinely commits to it, except after first tasting the bitterness of conflict, being scorched by the fire of war, and growing weary of the souls extinguished, and the blood spilled. Humanity is political by nature, then, and savage by nature too — or, as Abu al-'Ala' puts it: human by birth, savage by instinct.

But Aristotle never established this single truth alone, in his own book on politics — he established another truth besides, in his own book on logic: that two contradictory things can never coexist together. And exactly as humanity has worked, and will continue working, as far as it is able, to prove the First Teacher was never mistaken in this first truth, so too has it worked, and will continue working, as far as it is able, to prove the First Teacher was never mistaken in this second truth either. Humanity cooperates in peace, and clashes in war, never combining cooperation and conflict together, at one and the same time, in one and the same place, under one and the same circumstances. And so matters proceed exactly as the First Teacher intended them to proceed: humanity realizes its own political nature for a long stretch of time, in which civilization flourishes, political order bears fruit, cooperation intensifies, and unity and fraternity grow ever greater. Then humanity realizes its own savage nature instead: civilization grows turbulent, political order corrupts, harmony is lost, and people become enemies to one another. Yet humanity always keeps advancing — genuinely loving Aristotle, genuinely honouring his own philosophy — while, at the very same time, correcting that same philosophy wherever correction proves possible, and demolishing it outright, wherever correction requires demolition!

The history of the modern European Renaissance amounted to nothing less than a correction of whatever had grown crooked in the First Teacher's own philosophy, a reform of whatever had grown corrupt in his own theories, and an outright abolition of some of these same theories,

wherever the intellect's own advancement required their abolition. It is not necessarily true, for instance, that two contradictory things can never coexist together, that people cannot, at one and the same time, be thoroughly immersed in both war and peace, thoroughly steeped in both civilization and savagery — genuine, productive intellectual progress is exactly what allows man to fight and make peace at once, to grow civilized and savage at once, to raise, with his own right hand, an olive branch, while brandishing, with his own left, a sword in which death itself seems to gleam, or from which death and destruction itself seem to drip.

All of this remains entirely possible — or, at least, something that ought to be possible, something that genuinely needs to be realized, so that people might know they are truly advancing, that their own intellect genuinely subjects nature to its own authority, and that the First Teacher's own philosophy, however much reverence and veneration still surrounds it, has grown old and threadbare, unsuited to a life of renaissance and renewal. Civilized humanity did achieve some real success in combining these two contradictions, in realizing both war and peace together, when the League of Nations was performing its own splendid acts in Geneva at the very same time Italy was attacking Abyssinia, in an aggression worthy of the gods of the ancient world. But humanity, at that time, never achieved the fullest measure of success, never carried it through to its own proper end — it attempted to restrain Italy from harm, to turn her back from aggression, imposing economic sanctions upon Italy that it never enforced, or never wished to enforce, or simply failed to enforce.

In any case, it condemned Italy's own aggression, yet still let her carry it out, letting her own ships and troops pass through the Suez Canal, flags flying high, granted every measure of honour and reverence, carrying horror, death, and destruction to a people with neither strength, nor means, nor any real capacity for defence. Nor did matters stop even there — humanity went on to recognize Italy's own conquest of Abyssinian soil, and Great Britain, France, and others accepted that the King of Italy should bear, exactly as the King of Great Britain bore, this same grand title: King-Emperor.

Nor, indeed, did matters stop there — humanity watched, half satisfied, half indignant, half accepting, half rejecting, as Italy attacked Albania, raining death down upon her people on one of Christianity's own holy days; watched, too, as Germany abolished Austria's own independence outright, and declared her own protectorate over

Czechoslovakia outright as well. And throughout all of this, natural political order kept concealing itself, bit by bit, while natural savagery kept revealing itself, little by little — until, on that well-known day, the fire of the Second World War finally broke out, and the earth filled with horror, savouring this same great gift: the gift of destruction demolishing every building, death snatching away the innocent and the weak, rising up to meet them from the earth, and descending upon them from the sky, while they, for their part, faced these same trials, whether they accepted them or resented them — accepting them, regardless, since they found no way of turning them aside.

Then strength faltered, activity grew weary — Italy fainted away, Germany then surrendered, Japan then fell. Savagery then began concealing itself, bit by bit, while natural political order began appearing once more, little by little. Performance then resumed in private theatres, and resumed, thereafter, in the grand public theatre itself: the story of the United Nations Charter was performed in San Francisco, and another story has now begun being performed — the story of the United Nations Assembly itself, and whatever councils and committees will be connected to it.

Theatrical performance, in ancient times, once took up an entire day, beginning at dawn, ending as night fell; it then came to take up only a few hours — but, in these very days, it has begun taking up entire weeks, and may well, at times, take up entire months.

There is nothing strange in that: the stories performed in this grandest of theatres run genuinely, excessively long, genuinely, thoroughly complex — for they dramatize the affairs of all humanity, not merely the affairs of a single city, or a single individual.

The ancients knew only two forms of theatre: the sorrowful form — tragedy — and the amusing form — comedy. Then the moderns came along, and created a third art, one that makes you laugh and weep, that grieves and delights at once — drama itself. And they grew perhaps genuinely inventive with this new art, mixing laughter with weeping, speech with song, elaborating on it further still, until the art grew genuinely varied, offering every human faculty exactly the pleasure it desires.

This grandest of theatres has favoured exactly this same complex, new art form. You saw, in San Francisco, whatever God willed you to see, and heard whatever God willed you to hear, of fierce dispute, and

charming harmony, of gravity rising to genuine magnificence, and farce sinking to genuine crudity. The curtain had scarcely fallen, this past summer, before it became clear Abu Nuwas had not been mistaken, when he said:

*What I once jested over has turned genuinely serious —
how much gravity, after all, play itself has dragged in its own wake.*

The nations played, in San Francisco, exactly whatever game God willed them to play — and then arrived, in the end, at this same terrifying gravity: that the small, weak nations, once compelled to submit to the authority of the strong, never acknowledging that submission, never yielding to it except reluctantly, now submit to that same authority in genuine, willing consent, in free choice, in a belief entirely free of coercion.

Its own delegates signed the San Francisco Charter, its own parliaments ratified that same Charter, and these same nations acknowledged that the strong hold a genuine right to control the weak, that the great hold a genuine right to dominate the small, that the rich hold a genuine right to manage the affairs of the poor exactly as they please and desire. The world's own affairs have, by virtue of this Charter, been divided into two tiers of nations: one, the upper aristocracy, consisting of the three great victorious powers; the other, the middling aristocracy, consisting of these same three powers, with France and China added to them. Do not say the whole of the United Nations is represented in the General Assembly — that same General Assembly holds no genuinely significant say whatsoever over war and peace. Nor say this same Assembly is represented in the Security Council — the Security Council itself holds no genuinely significant say over war and peace either, unless ratified by the five great powers acting together. Say, rather, if you prefer, that this new order for this new world allows a single one of these five powers to control the entire world exactly as it pleases — international order has returned, then, to a genuinely novel variety of one-man rule, or, say, to a genuinely novel variety of one-man domination. And when I say "one man," I mean exactly its own precise sense. The great and small nations alike may well settle upon some matter or other — only for it to come to nothing at all, simply because Mr. Attlee, or Mr. Truman, or Marshal Stalin, or General de Gaulle, or Marshal Chiang Kai-shek, said, frowning or smiling: "No..."

And now we witness this second story, in this grandest of theatres now unfolding in London — the very theatre that will establish the United

Nations Assembly... God forgive me, I mean, rather, it will grant it its own existence, laying down its own rules, regulations, and foundational principles, establishing the Security Council, the Trusteeship Council, the Atomic Energy Council, and whatever other councils and committees you please. The story is being performed along exactly the same lines as the San Francisco story: the victors met at the Crimea, drafted the very script for the San Francisco theatre, and performed it magnificently; the victors then met, finally, in Moscow, drafted the script for the London theatre, and will, God willing, perform this one just as magnificently.

Some stories, though, are granted success, and others granted failure: the victors drafted the San Francisco story, and it was granted success; but they drafted another story at Potsdam, and when it was staged for performance in London, that autumn, the five Foreign Ministers failed to perform it, disgracefully. They have now drafted a third play, in Moscow, whose own curtain has just risen, today, in London, with the entire world now watching this same performance, by radio, by wire, by newspaper — and the days to come will tell us whether this same play is destined for success, or for failure.

What stands genuinely certain is that the connection between this same theatrical art and real life has been genuinely, significantly severed — you might say this same performance unfolds on the very margins of the world, or you might say the world's own life itself unfolds on the very margins of this performance. The problem of Iran, the problem of Turkey, the problems of the Near East, the problems of the Far East — all of these same problems find their own way toward complexity and confusion, or toward resolution and relief, without any trace of that ever appearing in whatever performance unfolds on the stage itself. And who knows — perhaps they grow complex and confused, or resolve and find relief, precisely during the intervals between acts, during the very breaks for rest. Whatever the case, it remains the world's own genuine right to amuse itself, and delight in itself, after being deprived of amusement and delight for six whole years. Performance is itself one variety of amusement, one form of delight — so let the world enjoy the London story exactly as it once enjoyed the San Francisco story. But the very gravest danger of all would be for the small nations to be genuinely deceived, taking this same performance for genuine right itself — performance is nothing but art; genuine right, by contrast, lies in nations' own care for themselves, and their own reliance on whatever effort they themselves expend.