Bargains

Mesamarat al-Gayb, 23 September 1945

Human life has never been held so cheap as it was held in the Second World War, and the dignity of peoples has never been held so cheap as it is held in this new peace. Human souls were extinguished, their own blood spilled, their own livelihoods destroyed, their own hopes shattered, without any reckoning at all, throughout the war.

All of this occurred, whether the war itself required it or not: sacrifices were offered up, on land, at sea, and in the air, from among soldiers and combatants; sacrifices were offered up, in cities and villages, from among civilians for whom security ought to have been guaranteed, presumed safe from the ravages of war. Then the Germans and the Japanese offered up countless further sacrifices, by the tens of thousands, among prisoners for whom the war ought to have already ended. All of this pointed toward a single thing: that civilized humanity had lost its own reason entirely, gone genuinely mad, driven by its own unbridled instincts toward a formidable horror sparing nothing, and no one.

Then the war laid down its own burdens, and it seemed, to whoever remained upon the earth, that human souls had at last been safeguarded, that blood had finally been spared, that security had become genuinely guaranteed, for soldiers and civilians alike. This much, perhaps, is true: the cannons have indeed fallen silent, swords have indeed been sheathed, and the sky and sea no longer remain a hidden, unknowable presence, capable of suddenly revealing, at any moment, aircraft pouring horror down from the very vault of heaven, or submarines hurling death up from the very depths of the water.

Whoever remained upon the earth believed these same terrible horrors had been a dear price paid for a new world, one in which peace and security might finally settle, and peoples might preserve their own dignity, and their own sanctity. And why should people not have believed this, when their own leaders spoke to them of it continuously, repeated it, reiterated it, for six whole years — until Churchill, Stalin, Roosevelt, Truman, Attlee, and other leaders and dignitaries became, in people's own eyes, the very messengers of a dignified, secure life for all the peoples of the earth, without distinction between strong and weak, nor between great and small.

No more than a few weeks had passed since the war's end before these same beliefs began proving false, these same hopes began proving disappointed; certain British newspapers began openly declaring this disappointment, this false hope, and the genuine anguish filling people's own hearts; the Manchester Guardian began urging Great Britain, insistently, to keep her own hands clean of the very sins avarice was on the verge of committing, here and there, in this or that part of the earth.

People believed those who deliberated at Potsdam were deliberating precisely in order to establish security, peace, well-being, and dignity for all people of the earth alike, even those against whom the wheels of war had turned, and who found themselves forced into defeat and surrender. People believed, too, that these same delegates had laid the foundations for this new, dignified life, and had established a Council of Foreign Ministers, charged to meet in London to coordinate and organize, and to show each nation its own allotted place in this paradise once lost, now found again — a paradise in which truth, justice, and fairness would bear fruits people had never even dared imagine.

The Council of Foreign Ministers duly met, and set about dividing this same paradise among its own inhabitants — only to find this paradise very nearly turning into a hell, for victors and vanquished alike, for the strong and the weak alike! The victors, for their part, find themselves genuinely tormented by these same abundant spoils, filling their own hearts with avarice, greed, arrogance, and insolence, unable to agree among themselves how to divide them, since each one wants the lion's own share for himself, leaving the fox's share, and the jackal's, for everyone else.

The vanquished, for their part, find themselves genuinely tormented by the violent struggle now surrounding their own torn fragments, their own scattered remnants — knowing they are to be devoured, yet not knowing who exactly will devour them. And there are others, too, who neither won nor lost, yet will suffer, all the same, exactly as the victors suffer, or exactly as the vanquished suffer — tormented by avarice for what they have no genuine right to, or tormented by fear of what they ought never to have feared at all. All of this news arriving from London, if it proves anything at all, proves only that London now hosts a genuinely vast marketplace for buying and selling, a marketplace in which the rights of peoples are bought and sold, subjected to a magnificent haggling — the very least one might say of it being that it has nothing whatsoever to do, near or far, with preserving the dignity of peoples.

These same bargains take every possible variety and form: bargains among the victors, bargains among the vanquished, bargains among the neutral. Who, for instance, will manage the affairs of Italy's own African colonies? Will some international council, headed by a governor-general, manage them? But how is this same governor-general to be chosen? From which nation is he to be chosen? Chosen from among the victorious nations? And, if so, from which of them — British? Russian? American? Or chosen from among the vanquished nations? And, if so, what value does victory itself retain? Or chosen from among the neutral nations? And, if so, for what did the belligerent nations spill their own sons' blood at all?

And this international trusteeship council itself — how is it to be constituted? From which nations are its own members to be chosen? From the victorious nations, or the vanquished, or the neutral, or the liberated? You could go round and round in exactly this same circle, precisely as the Council of Foreign Ministers itself keeps going round in it, until sheer effort exhausts you, and dizziness overtakes you. Or should the management of these same colonies be entrusted, instead, to individual trusteeship, some single victorious power shouldering the burden alone? And, if so, which victorious power could possibly shoulder such a burden? Great Britain, who conquered Libya, and drove the vanquished from it? Who would not at all mind making Tripoli into a naval base of real significance, should it be joined to Malta? Who would not at all mind making Cyrenaica into a base for her own land, sea, and air forces, from which to watch over Egypt, should circumstances ever compel her own evacuation from Egypt itself — an evacuation she is entirely capable of, but would rather carry out toward the west, settling in Cyrenaica, and toward the east, settling in Palestine, remaining, in this way, genuinely close to her own friend and ally, Egypt, ready to answer her first call, and fly to her own defence at the slightest aggression.

Or should this trusteeship, instead, be entrusted to Russia, who has grown genuinely weary of her own isolation within her vast territory, so violently severed from the Mediterranean, and whose own longing for the Mediterranean, whose own yearning to settle upon some part of its own coastline, has grown so long-standing? Great Britain, after all, possesses her own colonies, and territories she administers under mandate — Russia possesses no colonies at all, and wants no colonialism, but remains, all the same, a victorious power, entitled, like any other, to a mandate of her own; a civilized power, whose own duty it is to civilize peoples, exactly as other powers civilize them.

Great Britain civilizes a great many peoples, and holds distinguished positions across the Mediterranean — would it be too much, then, to grant Russia the civilizing of the Libyan people, and her own settlement upon this same part of the Mediterranean coast? America, meanwhile, deserves a mandate no less than these two powers, and stands no less prepared than either to civilize peoples — why should she not receive a mandate in Libya too? And even should she not request such a mandate herself, nor need to, the very least good taste would require that it be offered to her regardless, as a courtesy, in appreciation of her own efforts, and to encourage her to serve Europe in peace exactly as she served it in war. France, too, is Libya's own neighbour, and a neighbour holds a genuine right of first refusal — so why should France not receive a mandate to administer Libya? Egypt, likewise, is Libya's own neighbour, and her own right of first refusal is no less than France's — so let the land be divided between France and Egypt: France administering the colony of Tripolitania, Egypt administering the colony of Cyrenaica.

The bargainers in London very nearly forgot history entirely — until Greece reminded them that she herself once possessed, in ancient times, in a bygone age and era, a genuinely significant colony in Cyrenaica; that she remains, besides, one of the Mediterranean's own powers, whose own people show a genuinely strong inclination toward emigration; that she took real, genuine part in the war, her own sons taking part in the conquest of Cyrenaica alongside the Eighth Army — would it not, then, be entirely reasonable to grant her a piece of land upon which to establish a colony in the modern age, exactly as she once established her own colony there in ancient times?!

The Americans, for their part, never forget history either, nor do they dislike mercy and fairness — they recall that the ancient Roman Empire once possessed Libya, that modern Italy once colonized her, and that vanquished Italy deserves punishment, yet with a measure of genuine mercy — so let Italy be charged with administering Libya, on condition she account for that same administration before a trusteeship council representing the United Nations.

And while everyone remained caught up in all of this, our own Turkish friends reminded them, with a sweet smile, that Italy had simply seized Libya from them by outright force — the Turks, after all, having held sway over that same land until the Italians attacked it in 1911. Why, then, should Libya not be returned to her own rightful owners? Why should the Turkish flag not fly once more over Tripoli, Benghazi, and

Tobruk? And it is among the clearest of facts that the Egyptians, too, governed Libya across a great many eras — in ancient times, and in the Middle Ages — the Fatimid state in Cairo once extending her own great authority over Libya.

These are facts no historian genuinely doubts, and it is Egypt's own right to revive her own history, and her own right, in any case, to secure her own borders. Accordingly, she came forward with real refinement and real courtesy — since Egyptians are people of real refinement and courtesy — and with real modesty too, since those given to modesty have, it seems, all passed away, and only the Egyptians remain! Egypt came forward, then, with refinement, courtesy, and modesty, requesting trusteeship over Libya, should trusteeship prove unavoidable, and requesting, too, with refinement, courtesy, modesty, and respect, that the Libyan people themselves be consulted — since they might well wish for independence, and Egypt would have no objection whatsoever to seeing them independent, and seeing them members of the League of Arab States. But the age we live in is not an age of refinement, courtesy, and modesty at all — it is, rather, an age in which only those whose hearts have hardened, whose natures have grown callous, whose faces have run dry of any water of shame, genuinely succeed. And so the victors smiled at Egypt with a genuinely charming smile, and turned away from her own request for trusteeship, and brushed aside her own proposal of a referendum and independence alike.

Most of the proposals I have laid before you in this piece have already been set aside, and only a single one remains: that Libya be placed under trusteeship — but whose trusteeship, exactly? Does Russia say, "Mine," with Great Britain answering, "No" — while some third party attempts to find some way of reconciling these two great allies? As for the Libyan people themselves, no one has asked them, and no one ever will — since they neither triumphed, nor were defeated, nor remained neutral; they were simply the very object of a struggle between victors and vanquished, an object of struggle throughout the war, and one that will remain an object of struggle throughout the peace as well. So the pen has already written it, and so judgment has already decreed it.

And exactly what is happening with respect to Libya is happening with respect to a great many other parts of the earth, in every country the victors and the vanquished have disputed over — so that, were I to lay before you the full varieties of bargaining now underway over East Africa, over the Balkans, over the Italian-Yugoslav border, over Germany's own

borders on every side, and over the various countries of the Far East, I would find myself forced to compile, for you, an entire massive volume, filling your own heart with nothing but weariness and tedium.

This, then, is the new life decreed for the new world — nothing but an exact copy of that same old life that once tormented the old world. Humanity, then, has been decreed to live a life whose very substance is torment — and what wonder is there in that? How much crime, how much sin, does man commit! How genuinely deserving he is of punishment for his own crimes and sins! His own life, old and new alike, rests on injustice and oppression, on force and might, on bargaining, buying, and selling. His own individual lives are sold at the cheapest price in time of war; his own peoples' dignity is sold at the cheapest price in time of peace — and there is no way out of it for him, since Abu al-'Ala' was not mistaken when he said:

Can man ever truly flee his own Lord's dominion,
and escape from a land, and a sky, that are His own?