The Magic of a Lifetime, by Mr. Tawfiq al-Hakim

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This book is not, as its author claims, a history of Mr. Tawfiq al-Hakim's life, but it is a precise portrait of his life up to the point at which he became a known writer, and I do not imagine this pleases him, but it is the truth all the same.

For whoever tells us that he was born calm, neither crying nor weeping as every newborn does, and who tells us of his earliest childhood and of his education from the time he first attended the kuttab schools, then the primary school, until he obtained his law degree, and who tells us of the various milieus through which he passed during his earliest childhood, and in late boyhood and early youth, and tells us of his going to France and his return from it without obtaining the doctorate, because he did not concern himself with the law, but devoted himself to culture in general and to the art of drama in particular, and who portrays for us his life in Paris, and his return to Egypt, and his passage through various posts — such a man is indeed writing for us the history of his life.

Indeed he goes further than this, for he attempts to explain this life, and traces many of its features back to heredity, and attempts to trace this heredity back to his parents, giving each of them their share of this life. Nor does he content himself with writing the history of his life, but strives to philosophize it, and wishes to divide the features of his life between his parents, so he tells us what he may have inherited of his father's nature, and what he may have inherited of his mother's nature — he portrays the history of his life with great precision, and adds to it its philosophy, and yet, despite all this, he tells us that he has not written the history of his life.

And whether this account pleases him or not, I affirm that he has given us a picture of his life that is wholly clear and wholly precise; and although he claims that his ambition exceeds his effort, and that his effort exceeds his talent, and that his talent is a prisoner of his nature, most of which he inherited from his parents, I affirm first that every writer's ambition exceeds his effort, and that this is the very distinction of a writer worthy of the name, just as it is the distinction of the excellent poet and the accomplished artist in general; and woe to the man of letters

whose ambition is proportioned to his effort, for such a man has nothing whatsoever of true literature in him — he is merely a labored, affected writer, laboring at what he does not do well and for which he was not made. As for his effort exceeding his talent, there may be some truth in this, for Mr. Tawfiq sometimes deviates from his talent and ventures with it into what it was not prepared for, as he did in at least two matters I shall now mention.

The first of these: when he wished to be a philosopher and devised his theory of equilibrium (al-ta'adul), even though his talent was not made for philosophy and was not prepared for it, but was rather made for the composition of delightful dramatic fiction; and the second: when he attempted to write the irrational tale, writing "O Climber of the Tree" and similar works, even though he was not made for this, but was made rather to be rational both in his writing and in what his readers read of him. As for his talent being a prisoner of his nature, there is no wonder in this, for all talents are prisoners of the natures their possessors were innately given, and nothing else is possible, for He who grants them always matches what He gives to what He has innately disposed people toward; so let Mr. Tawfiq not take it amiss if I say that this phrase with which he opens his book resembles nothing so much as a mirage, which the thirsty man takes for water until, upon reaching it, he finds nothing there.

And after all this I say — not to please the author, but to please the truth — that this book is delightful, and I attest that I read it twice in less than three days, and the least of its delights is that it portrays the life of an accomplished writer whom people have loved and whom most of them have been enamored of, and he does not content himself with portraying the writer's life alone, but portrays the life of his parents as well. And I do not know what the history of a life could be, if not a precise description of the writer's birth, his upbringing, and the stages through which he passed until he arrived at his present eminent standing; and if this proves anything, it proves only that Mr. Tawfiq al-Hakim's ambition exceeds his effort. He has chronicled it with precise chronicling. And his life is in itself worthy of being chronicled, for it is a rare life in our own milieu, even if it is familiar enough in many others.

And he has told us that he is enamored of the French writer Anatole France; let him know, then, that this great French writer never obtained the secondary school certificate, and was indeed mocked by the examination committee, to the point that one of the examiners described

him as a donkey; so let our friend thank his Lord that he did obtain the secondary certificate, and the bachelor's degree in law, and no harm comes to him for not obtaining the doctorate — indeed he himself is primarily responsible for that, since when he went to Paris he did not seek that degree, but sought general culture and the art of dramatic fiction instead. And the doctorate, whether in law, or in letters, or in whatever field of study one pleases, does not descend upon people from the sky, but people must strive and labor to attain it.

And our friend expended, in pursuit of the doctorate, neither an effort greater than his talent nor one smaller than it; had his parents been in Paris when he went there, he would have expended that effort, and would have become a doctor of law in spite of himself.

What matters is that he has written for us a valuable and delightful book — not merely because he has chronicled for us the life of an excellent writer, but because he has also, besides this, chronicled the theater in Egypt with a precise, detailed, engaging chronicle, wholly clear, and then portrayed his literary life for us with the most precise and most skillful portrayal, so that it is as though we had been with him recording the stages through which he passed. And all this is no small matter; and if all this does not suffice him or satisfy him, that is neither strange nor contrary to the nature of things, for the writer who has perfected his art is never satisfied with what he writes unless vanity has filled him and taken possession of his mind and his nature.

And we had been unaware — or most of his readers had been unaware — that he had written dramatic fiction during his studies in Egypt, and that some of what he wrote had been given the chance to be performed and seen by audiences, and I did not know that he used to write poetry, or something resembling poetry. He used to write words that composers would set to music, and that singers would sing, and I do not know why he turned away, from the time he went to France, from this kind of verbal composition meant to be sung. And who knows — perhaps, had he continued writing this type of poetry or quasi-poetry, he would have become more than a writer of dramatic fiction, and would have added to that the composition of operas and operettas; but France, it seems, diverted him from this manner of expression.

And I thank the author for his mention of me and his remark that we had become friends, though I do not know why he did not explain how we came to be friends. And who knows — perhaps that is because his nature

exceeds his talent, his effort, and his ambition all together?

And the author says that he inherited from his father — God rest his soul — many traits, among them: a preference for thrift in spending and in speech; and perhaps he forgot another trait, though I do not know from whom he inherited it — namely, thrift in movement as well.

For he moves little, and cannot bear to expend his effort on anything but writing, and perhaps this is no hardship to himself alone, but is a hardship to others as well; and I do not know whether his father — God rest his soul — was tempted and governed by the sight of gold coins, but I do know this of the son, for he has recorded it himself in some of his books. I know that he was once haggling with a publisher, and when he saw in this publisher's hand a banknote, he could not continue the haggling, but handed over the book and took the ten-pound note.

And I do not believe what he always repeats, that he favors money to the point of miserliness with it; I do not believe this, because I have tested his generosity and the openness of his hand in giving, and I said as much when I welcomed him at the Arabic Language Academy, though he reproached me for it afterward, at the end of the session, excusing his reproach on the grounds that such a statement might tempt people and encourage those with requests to approach him.

And I, in any case, offer the author friend my sincerest congratulations and my most heartfelt thanks, for he was so kind as not to have sent me a single one of his books for years, so he has my thanks, all my thanks — though I do hope he will permit me to take some small part of this thanks and offer it instead to the dear friend who lent me this book.