Defense (I)

Taha Hussein

Kawkab al-Sharq, 4 January 1934

1 I wish to take up the burdens of this defense as a voluntary act of good, as alms from the little strength I possess, seeking mercy for mercy's own sake, and loving compassion for compassion's own sake.

2 And I do not know why the opposition must always be harsh. Why must opposition be pure harshness? Why have the opposition sworn themselves to an oath that binds them, across the days, to be hard men who know no mercy, and rough men who know no gentleness — when no scholar of language, and no man of politics, has ever said that opposition ought to be nothing but pure harshness, and severity admitting neither leniency nor kindness?

3 Let the scholars of language say what they will, and let the men of politics say what they will; let the opposition be angered or pleased, let readers approve or disapprove — for today I am resolved to defend the ministry, because I have grown today most inclined toward mercy, most eager for gentleness and compassion.

4 And I wish to seize this occasion, and to defend the ministry in this piece, before the opposition's harshness overtakes me once more, or before I myself return to the harshness of opposition, or before this feeling leaves me which makes me gentle and merciful, and inclines me toward the weak, who find no shield to protect them, no defender to guard them, no champion to turn back the aggression of the aggressors.

5 And the aggressors here are these opponents who describe the ministry as weak and lacking, as incapable and remiss, and call its policy a policy of stagnation. Nor are they content with this; they go further, making light of it, jesting over it, and proposing to the good man — truly and sincerely good, as the people say — that he should rest every time a storm blows against him or a squall settles over him, and that he should rest not in his own house as other men rest, but aboard one of the state's own vessels, which would carry him up the Nile and down to the sea, as the pampered rest.

6 This is too much! And more than this, those who write it do not feel that they are being unjust, and excessive in their injustice, and that

this kind of biting humor and bitter jesting ought never to be aimed at the good man; it ought, rather, to be aimed — and was in fact aimed — at Sidqi Pasha; for Sidqi Pasha was strong and tough, able to receive both earnestness and mockery, able to endure both earnestness and mockery; he cared for nothing, was wounded by nothing, and indeed nothing of what was written or said about him ever reached him at all.

7 But the good man is delicate of feeling, tender of temperament, pampered and fond of ease, mindful of consequences, zealous for peace, averse to quarrels, and loath to dispute or contend. None ought to attack him, or contest him, or do him wrong but those from whose hearts mercy has been utterly torn out, from whose souls compassion has been wholly uprooted, whose hearts have been fashioned of flint and whose souls of iron.

8 And these harsh men may say that the good man did contest Sidqi Pasha, and bore up under that contest. He took the premiership after Sidqi Pasha stepped down from it, unafraid of succeeding him, untroubled by the weight of what he inherited; indeed, he went on parrying and maneuvering against Sidqi Pasha until he drove him to resign from the party twice — in jest the first time, in earnest the second — and then to resign once from the Chamber of Deputies, in jest, though no doubt he will resign a second time, in earnest, once the month of fasting ends, and once he sees in the Chamber how earnest can turn to earnest, and how the leader calls upon his supporters, and not one of them answers him, and nothing returns to him but the echo of his own voice filling the air, which then reaches no ear, knocks at no hearing, and settles in no soul.

9 And if the good man has been able to bring Egypt's twentieth-century tyrant to such a pass, and to make him taste every kind of torment, then he is strong and tough, patient and firm, and capable of enduring earnestness and mockery, biting humor and bitter jesting, as much as Sidqi Pasha endured, or more than Sidqi Pasha endured.

10 But those who say this go to excess and overreach, making excuses to themselves on their own behalf, without persuading anyone of what they say; for the good man did nothing at all to Sidqi Pasha, nor was it his place to do anything to him — he was simply summoned to the premiership, and accepted the premiership, and had he been left alone with Sidqi Pasha, he would never have held his ground in the premiership; but circumstances surrounded him with an impregnable

wall, an unassailable fortress, and loosed against Sidqi Pasha soldiers who struck him deaf and wore him down until they forced him to retreat.

11 And Sidqi Pasha once had a solid, impregnable shield off which arrows glanced harmlessly; but once power stripped him of it, he stood bare of that shield, and the arrows that were loosed at him no longer failed to strike and lodge in him; and now his whole body is nothing but arrows, or the marks of arrows. Yet it was not the good man who shot them; it was circumstance that shot them! And it was not the good man who expelled Sidqi Pasha from the party; it was circumstance that expelled him. And it will not be the good man who expels Sidqi Pasha from the Chamber of Deputies; it will be circumstance that expels him!

12 And so the good man is no man of struggle and war, no man of thrust and blow; the good man is, rather, a man of ease, peace, calm, and security; and to direct blame at him, and to loose tongues against him, is an injustice that ought never to be, a harassment beyond endurance. They will say: but the good man stood firm against the legal profession and the lawyers — indeed, he assailed the legal profession and the lawyers; he warned and gave notice, then thundered and lightened, then drew up the legislation, then brought it before both Houses, then issued it and made it law, then denied the lawyers utterly and disregarded them utterly, and held two celebrations the lawyers did not attend. And whoever did all this, and undertook all this, is surely fit to bear criticism, and to stand up to both mockery and earnestness.

13 But this talk, like other such talk, cannot withstand criticism, nor hold its ground before sound judgment; for the good man is good by nature and does not love evil, just by nature and does not love tyranny, kind by nature and does not love wickedness, calm by nature and does not love turmoil, gentle by nature and does not love violence. And whoever is of this disposition and these qualities could never have assailed the legal profession or contested the lawyers; it was not he who assailed the one or contested the other, but circumstance — and woe to mankind from circumstance!

14 It is circumstance that wronged the lawyers, just as the good man's rivals wrong the good man, and did the lawyers harm, just as the good man's rivals do the good man harm; for the lawyers are wronged, and the good man too is wronged.

15 And circumstance — and woe to mankind from circumstance! — is what wronged the one, and what wronged the other.

16 And the lawyers have triumphed, and vindicated themselves; but they did not triumph over the good man, for the good man never warred against them; rather, they triumphed over circumstance, and vindicated themselves against circumstance. So those who blame the good man go to excess against him, and go to excess against themselves; and if they must place blame, and if they must be harsh, and if they must try their skill at criticism, their talent for mockery and earnestness alike, then let them leave the good man to what he is, and direct all their blame, all their criticism, all their earnestness, and all their mockery at circumstance; for it was circumstance that committed what they condemn — this zeal in the war against Sidqi Pasha, this violence in the war against the lawyers, this neglect of weighty affairs, this slumber before matters of great consequence. Indeed, it was circumstance that disturbed this good man, and bore him, as it were, from Europe on the wings of an ostrich, until it settled him in the premiership, and then carried out, by his innocent hands, whatever deeds it carried out.

17 And all readers will bear witness that I do not hate criticism, nor fear to venture upon it; but they will also bear witness that I do not love Ziyad, nor the tale of Ziyad, and that I do not hold the innocent to account for the guilty one's sin. And the good man is innocent, innocent of every blame directed at him; for he is good, truly and sincerely, as the people say, and it is circumstance alone that is the guilty party, deserving every measure of blame.

18 For this reason I blame none but circumstance, and I would have the ministry's rivals contend with none but circumstance. If the policy of stagnation must be mentioned, let it be mentioned as circumstance's policy; and if rest aboard a Nile vessel must be proposed, let that rest be proposed to circumstance! You will say: and how can circumstance rest in a house or a vessel? And how can circumstance sail up the Nile or down to the sea? To which I say: and how did circumstance overpower Sidqi Pasha? And how did circumstance wage its war against the lawyers? Did it not do all of this through the hand of the prime minister? Then let it rest, then, in the person of the prime minister.

19 You will say: then the blame is directed at the prime minister, since circumstance does and bears nothing except by assuming the prime minister's form; to which I say: this is true, but there is a vast difference between blaming the prime minister as the statesman Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha, and blaming him as the manifestation of what circumstance wills, and of whatever deeds circumstance brings about.

20 And I think the prime minister himself would be pleased by this distinction, and would find comfort in this manner of picturing things; for he is not to be blamed, since he is truly and sincerely a good man, but circumstance is to be blamed in his person; for this circumstance is cunning, skillful, and treacherous, and insists on having a person and a name of its own, and has gone to such excess in its cunning, skill, and treachery that it has assumed the prime minister's person, and taken his name for these days. Let us, then, blame it in this person, and call it by this name, until it assumes another person, or another person assumes it, and until it takes another name, or another name is imposed upon it!

21 And perhaps this will be soon; so that the good man may find rest even from the blame of circumstance.