

Hunger and Talk

Al-Musawwar, 21 November 1947.

1 Hunger and talk!... For we are the most eloquent of all peoples in speech, the loudest of all peoples in voice, and the most accomplished of all peoples in gesture and performance... and yet we are proverbial for wretchedness, ignorance, and disease, and for rushing headlong into death as moths rush headlong into the flame!...

2 Let not our dear fellow citizens take offense that we deal harshly with them in speech, and speak roughly to them in conversation; for the truth must sometimes be spoken even when it fails to reach the place of contentment in their souls, and the truth must sometimes be spoken even when it reaches the place of anger in their souls and stirs up resentment and rage in their hearts.

3 Our dear fellow citizens have grown accustomed to having praise measured out to them in heaps, and commendation poured upon them in torrents, until they have come to be exceedingly content with themselves, and exceedingly indignant with others, and have slept their fill of sleep while events never sleep, and have lived carelessly, heedlessly, snatched at by calamities and toyed with by misfortunes, without any of it changing in the slightest their opinion of themselves and their lives; for they have grown used to contentment with themselves, and to ease of mind about their lives, until it has become among the hardest of hard things to draw them out of this contentment or disturb them out of this ease of mind...

4 And yet they must, all the same, be made to see the facts of the matter, and be drawn out of their contentment, and disturbed out of their ease of mind, and made to know that they are living the most hateful of lives, and existing in the most hideous of existences. And this old Arab proverb that I have taken as the title of this piece was coined for none but them, was applied to none but them, and depicted nothing but what they have persisted in and entangled themselves in — much talk that avails nothing, and little action that profits nothing!

5 Our dear fellow citizens may perhaps have taken note of two days of this past week, one of them the Feast of the Struggle and the other the Feast of the Hijra, and before them a day whose gravity and whose importance in their lives were immense — the day Parliament opened!

6 Our dear fellow citizens may perhaps have observed that these three days passed exactly as the rest of their unbroken days pass, one following upon another, each resembling the other as one drop of water resembles another, until it is as though all their days, for all their variety and their succession, were a single day!

7 These three days passed as the rest of their days pass: much talk, little action, agitation without movement, activity without production, a great clattering of the millstones without any grinding, and afterward contentment with themselves, and afterward ease of mind about this monotonous, tedious life that benefits neither people nor its own possessors, and that spares neither people nor its own possessors anything at all!

8 Magnificent and masterful was the Speech from the Throne delivered by the Prime Minister before Parliament; it depicted Egyptian life for us as the very best that the life of nations could be: a serious government that neither sleeps nor lulls others to sleep, and a laboring people that neither rests nor lets others rest!

9 And the government was content with itself, and so it praised itself, and Parliament was content with the government, and so it applauded the government, and the people heard the government speaking and Parliament applauding; so they lifted their shoulders, and shook their heads, and left creation to the Creator. And the affluent turned to their affluence, luxuriating without reckoning, and the deprived turned to their deprivation, suffering without reckoning, and between the two there wavered a middle group of people, eating without being filled and drinking without being quenched, and all of them content with what has been, at ease with what is, prepared for what shall be, confident that Egypt is God's own chosen treasure upon His earth, is the paradise of this world, the ornament of the globe, and the leader of the Arab peoples toward a glory unmatched by any other glory, and a pride unrivaled by any other pride!

10 And all the while, citizens were dying by the hundreds, and falling ill by the hundreds, snatched away by this sudden death, and struck down by this sudden illness, while around them thousands upon thousands were snatched away by the ordinary death that no epidemic carries, and struck down by the ordinary illness that no epidemic carries either... And all the while, likewise, millions of citizens were luxuriating in the ignorance that veils from them the facts of life, so that they do not

see what state they are in, and do not weigh their own life against the lives of the people of other nations... And these millions, all the while as well, were luxuriating in their own poverty, which occupies them with the pursuit of sustenance and the feeding and clothing of their dependents, without their ever finding what they seek, though it occupies them, at any rate, enough to keep them from reflecting on their own lives, and weighing them against the lives of the people of other nations!

11 All of this was happening in the newspapers from Wednesday the twelfth of November onward, while the Prime Minister was informing Parliament of what the government had done and what it would do, successful in the past and in the future in rescuing the people from death and disease, from poverty and ignorance, and in enabling eternal, glorious Egypt to raise her great and noble head among the advanced nations, which have not attained and shall never attain what Egypt has attained of glory and pride!

12 "Hunger and talk" — as the old Arab proverb says — on Wednesday the twelfth of November! And "hunger and talk" on Thursday the thirteenth of November, when the officials rested from work in celebration of the Feast of the National Struggle! And what celebration of the struggle is equal to resting — not from the struggle, for the days of struggle have long since passed! — but from the small daily labor that secures their wages at the end of the month?! And what celebration of the struggle resembles drawing wages without working, even though there are other folk upon whom rest is imposed in celebration of the struggle, only for them then to be denied their wages for that very day, because they were compelled to rest in celebration of the struggle?!

13 On that day, the orators gave their orations and the leaders made their speeches, and the Revolution was recalled and the martyrs were praised! And all the while, the British army lay encamped in its allotted positions, not celebrating the Feast of the Struggle, because that struggle had never cost it so much as a single thread!

14 And "hunger and talk" on Friday, the first day of the month of Muharram in the year thirteen hundred and sixty-seven of the Hijra... On that day, the elaborately composed articles were written, the ornately phrased chapters were penned, the splendid celebrations were held, and the Muslims recalled this momentous human event that changed the course of history — the Hijra — and recalled the lesson and the admonition it holds! Some of them wept, and some of them feigned

weeping, while the rest of them put on an air of solemnity, troubling themselves neither with feigned weeping nor with real!

15 Then Friday came to an end exactly as days have grown accustomed to coming to an end: torpor and stagnation, idleness and inertia, deep sleep, and an immersion in that same empty life that people have grown accustomed to immersing themselves in — a life that spares neither people nor its own possessors anything at all.

16 "Hunger and talk" in these three days, and hunger and talk in the days that preceded them and in the days that shall follow them!

17 Newspapers beyond counting, and talk within them beyond counting, greeting people morning and evening; and chatter on the radio beyond counting, greeting people morning and evening; and a great deal of nonsense beyond counting, distracting people from themselves, from their lives, from their hopes, and from their pains. Sleep does not divert them from it; indeed, when they sleep and dreams come upon them, they do not even escape this nonsense!

18 Hunger... and talk, for we are the most eloquent of all peoples in speech, the loudest of all peoples in voice, and the most accomplished of all peoples in gesture and performance... and yet we are proverbial for wretchedness, ignorance, and disease, and for rushing headlong into death as moths rush headlong into the flame! And God consoles people for their pains, and comforts them for their misfortunes, through the work that removes pain and lifts misfortune, just as He comforts them through speech that erases no pain, lifts no harm, and dispels no calamity, but only makes those who utter it the laughingstock of those who laugh and the mockery of those who mock!

19 Let us then implore God to cure us of this malady of excessive talk, for perhaps, were we cured of this malady, we might find consolation for our pains and our calamities in the work that removes pain, prevents calamity, and dispels distress.