The Cheapness of Life ...

Al-Jumhuriya, 13 November 1954.

Life has never been held so cheap by people as it is held in these days; for in ancient times people knew war and shed their blood abundantly, sometimes in the cause of truth and sometimes in the cause of falsehood. And in ancient times people knew guile and scheming, just as they knew injustice and aggression, and killed one another, sometimes openly and often by stealth. But they used to undertake what they undertook of this only after much hesitation beforehand, and with much remorse and dread after having carried it through.

Human life was a thing of consequence; religions had made it sacrosanct, laws had recognized its inviolability, morals had guarded it, and even those who transgressed against it magnified its gravity themselves, for they held that in daring against it they were committing a sin of the gravest kind — one of those sins for which there could be no remedy.

For man has been granted the means to set right much of his error, to remedy much of his sin, and to erase the traces of wrongdoing through good deeds. But one thing alone has never been granted him: the power to restore life to one deprived of life. And so killing, whether by mistake or by intent, was among the gravest evils, one that struck man with dread and filled his heart with terror, awe, remorse, and denial.

And people used to speak at length of those criminals who delighted in killing and felt, after committing it, no remorse, nor, before committing it, any dread or fear.

They regarded such men as outcasts who had escaped the laws of human nature, which magnify human life and regard any transgression against it, deliberate or accidental, as a grave matter. And some people were driven to such excess in magnifying life that they extended this reverence beyond human life to the life of animals themselves, holding that life is a sacred spark which none dare extinguish save those who have divested themselves of all feeling of gentleness, mercy, piety, and tenderness. And so they forbade themselves things that others held lawful, forbidding them to themselves for their whole lives, or forbidding them to themselves at set times, from one period to another.

And for some reason, Abu al-'Ala [al-Ma'arri] went to such lengths in his asceticism that he spent most of his life eating nothing but what the earth itself produces. And for some reason he regarded the killing of animals as a form of cowardice, and saw in it proof of a base spirit, one driven to tyrannize over weakness and to commit aggression against a creature unable to ward off aggression and injustice from itself. And his biographers relate that he once fell ill, and his illness grew so severe that it reduced him to great weakness, so the physician prescribed that he eat chicken, and he refused the physician and refused those who were nursing him. And when they pressed him most insistently, he yielded to what they wanted of him, and a chicken was brought to him; but no sooner had he touched it than a violent shudder seized him, and he turned away from it, saying to it: "They judged you weak, and so prescribed you — would that they had prescribed the lion's cub instead!"

He meant that the chicken is unable to resist those who covet it; people desire it and prescribe it for the sick, whereas the lion guards its cub, so that none covets it and no physician prescribes it for any patient. And for some reason, Abu al-'Ala, among other things, composed these splendid verses forbidding the eating of animal flesh to man, thereby exposing himself to great harm from the sultan's wrath:

I rose this morning sick in mind and faith — so come to me,
that you may hear the true report of things as they truly are
Eat not, in wrongdoing, what the sea has yielded up,
nor seek your sustenance from the freshly slaughtered.
Nor the eggs that mothers plainly intended
for their own young, not for noble ladies' tables.
Grieve not the birds, while they lie unaware,
of what they laid — for injustice is the worst of ugly deeds.
And leave alone the labor of the bees, for which they rose at dawn
as gatherers from the blossoms of fragrant plants.
For what they stored up was not meant for another,
nor did they gather it for generosity and gifts.
I have wiped my hand clean of all this — would that
I had awakened to my own affair before my temples turned grey.

Abu al-'Ala — as you see — forbids himself, and wishes to forbid others, the eating of animal flesh and of anything animals produce; even the honey the bees produce, he regards as injustice and transgression,

thereby contravening what the heavenly religions have permitted people in all of this. And this poem of his reached Egypt, where the chief missionary of the Fatimid propagandists disputed with him over it, and the matter very nearly ended in his ruin.

And it was the sanctification of human life that led people to magnify death and what comes after death, and that led people to magnify the sanctity of funerals, whatever they might be. It is related that a funeral procession once passed by the Prophet — peace and blessings be upon him — as he sat among his companions, and he rose for it, and his companions rose as he rose; then he was told it was the funeral of a Jew, and he said: "Is it not a soul?!"

And it is likewise the sanctification of life that has driven the widespread modern rejection of the death penalty, whatever the crime of the one sentenced to it. Those who hold this view consider life too grave a matter and too inviolable a thing for a person to permit himself to take it away, and they hold that life is something man cannot bestow, and therefore ought not to take away — for only the one who grants life may take it.

And so people went to great lengths in sanctifying life, and in rejecting violence and aggression against it. And God's command still stands, forbidding the taking of life save by right, and the laws still forbid aggression against life and punish it with the harshest and most unsparing penalty. But religion and the law are one thing, and what people have been driven to in their modern life is quite another, and there is no doubt that people have never known an age in which human life was held so cheap by people as in this age in which we live.

States defy the command of religion and of law, and launch into that detestable warfare which recognizes no sanctity in the lives of individuals or communities, and has no reverence for religion, law, or morals, and makes no distinction between the armed soldiers who take part in it and the unarmed, peaceable civilians who want neither war nor combat, and wish only to live in ease and comfort, bearing the burdens of life light and heavy, harming no one and wishing no one to intend them harm. And the plunging of modern war into sin, its disregard for life, its contempt for sacred things, and its indiscriminate spreading of death and horror — all of this has squandered the value of life in war, and has squandered the value of life in peace as well.

And so long as the sovereign power itself permits itself to transgress religion and law in pursuit of profit and ambition, individuals and communities too may permit themselves to transgress religion and law in pursuit of profit and ambition. And so long as the civilized states, which have attained the utmost degree of advancement man has so far been able to reach, permit themselves to destroy lives and shed blood without reckoning, in order to gain wealth and extend dominion, then individuals and communities too may do as they do and follow their example, destroying lives and shedding blood for the sake of small gains and modest ambitions. And people count the dead of the two world wars in the millions, and count the dead of the European revolutions between the two wars in the hundreds and thousands, and count the dead of colonialism in the tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands. And these many victims are not sacrificed by mistake, nor are they sacrificed in the cause of justice and right; rather, they are sacrificed deliberately, in answer to injustice and tyranny, without hesitation, without restraint, and without caution.

And I read in one of the French newspapers that reached me from Paris in these past few days that the French killed, of the people of Algeria, in the year 1945, after the Second World War had laid down its burdens, a vast number — those who minimize it put it at fifteen thousand, and those who maximize it put it at forty thousand — and God alone knows how many Algerians the French are killing now in this ongoing revolt of theirs, and how many Tunisians and Moroccans they have killed, and how many they are killing in this continuous struggle between a people who wish to live with dignity and others who wish to degrade them and reduce them to slaves, after modern civilization has, in the words of its own proponents, abolished slavery. And the victims of colonialism in Indochina, colonizers and resisters alike, are not counted in the tens of thousands, but in the hundreds of thousands. And who knows how many victims English colonialism has claimed, in the east and west of the earth, from the end of the Second World War until now.

And you cannot read a newspaper, morning or evening, without finding in it some account of the death now being poured out in Iran upon those displeased with the agreement reached over the exploitation of the oil wells; for human life in this age has become a cheaper and less weighty matter than what the earth yields of its living and dead produce. And if you were to characterize this age as the age of cheap human life and costly human gain, or as the age of human blood whose worth falls

short of the worth of oil, which extends dominion and yields wealth, you would not be exaggerating or overstepping the truth.

And I had been thinking of all this for a long time, and I thank God — whom alone one thanks even for what is unwelcome — and I used to say to myself, and to many others, that we remained in good health, spared the trial that others were being tested with, of the cheapness of human life set against the costliness of money, gain, and ambitions however paltry.

But modern civilization has abolished distances and spans, and brought people close to one another despite whatever separates their lands and homes. And we used to regard this as a good thing, counting it progress, and a step toward the world's unification or the narrowing of its differences, toward gathering people upon a common word, purifying their hearts of rancor, ridding their souls of injustice, and enabling them to live as brothers, enjoying what God has permitted them of life's good things, without exploiting one another, or degrading one another, or holding themselves superior to one another, or taking one another as lords apart from God.

But it has become clear that we were deceiving ourselves, coveting what was not truly within reach, and wishing for what the time for achieving had not yet come. And it has become clear to us that evil incites to evil, that wrongdoing calls to wrongdoing, and that death desires death.

And then one day we wake, and horror reveals itself to us in its ugliest form, and some Egyptians are scheming against other Egyptians, and death wishes to gain mastery over Egypt as it has gained mastery over so many other lands of the earth. And each of us had been secure with the security of heedless unawareness, imagining that he would be exposed only to those misfortunes that secure people are exposed to — misfortunes that man does not inflict upon man, but that nature inflicts upon life. We were truly unaware, deceived by what we knew of this peaceable, tranquil, generous homeland of ours, which loves no violence and is not accustomed to it, and does not wish it even to reach its soil, let alone settle there. And why not? Have we not witnessed, these past two years, a revolution led by an army holding in its hand such means of force and violence as would tempt it to destroy lives and shed blood, yet it mastered itself and mastered its own hand, destroying no life and shedding no blood, bringing about no harshness but what could be

remedied, and wounding none without being capable of gentleness? Our revolution stands singular among revolutions, bringing about nothing that cannot be set right tomorrow or the day after.

All of this is because Egypt loves no violence and is not accustomed to it, because the souls of her people are as pure as the purity of her air, as clear as the clearness of her sky, as radiant as the radiance of her sun, making their way securely as her Nile makes its way securely, spreading fertility and bounty around it; rancors and resentments stir within her from time to time, but she is not long in returning to health, just as winds rise within her and fill the air with dust, only to return before long to calm and tranquil stillness.

Such we have known Egypt to be throughout her various ages, and such we saw her when her army rose two years ago and drove out the tyrant — yet drove him out unharmed, left to live as he wished to live, having done no harm to Egypt, nor having himself been harmed, little or much.

And harshness befell some of her sons which gentleness could have remedied, on one of these serene days that know how to fill Egyptian hearts with love, ease, security, and peace. But then one day we wake to discover that a faction among us had been preparing death, horror, and malice for their fellow men in the very life that religion sanctifies above all else in human affairs.

What are these weapons? And what is this ammunition being stored up in the houses of the living and in the graves of the dead? What is this scheming being schemed? What are these plots being plotted? What is this guile being devised? Why all this evil, and why all this malice? And why has the life of Egyptians become so cheap to Egyptians, as the life of Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians has become cheap to the French, and as the life of Africans and Asians has become cheap to the English?

It is said that the life of Egyptians has become cheap to Egyptians by the command of Islam itself, which has forbidden nothing as it has forbidden killing, commanded nothing as it has commanded mutual cooperation in righteousness and piety, forbidden nothing as it has forbidden mutual cooperation in sin and aggression, encouraged nothing as it has encouraged justice, charity, and righteousness, and warned against nothing as it has warned against indecency, wrongdoing, and transgression.

Far from it! Islam does not command storing up death for Muslims; rather, it safeguards the blood of Muslims once they bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and it regards the killing of an innocent soul as among the gravest of sins and the most hideous of crimes. What we face is rather a detestable contagion, part of it rising from the depths of history and part of it arriving from the four corners of the earth, where what is forbidden is made licit, where blood is shed without right, and where death is made desirable for the slightest reason.

Part of it came from the depths of history, from those of whom the Messenger of God — peace be upon him — said that they read the Qur'an and it does not pass beyond their collarbones, and for whom it was the easiest thing in the world to make licit the blood of Muslims whatever their standing in Islam, while scrupling, in everything else, with the scrupulousness of fools rather than the scrupulousness of those who reflect, deliberate, and know what they do and what they refrain from. And part of it came from this surrounding evil that has filled the earth with injustice and corruption, from this unceasing killing in wars some of the strong stir up against others, and in the violence the strong pour out upon the weak in colonized lands whose people desire freedom, while those who dominate them insist on nothing but submission, compliance, obedience, and acquiescence, which they impose upon them by iron and fire.

And news of this surrounding evil fills the air by way of the radio, and fills hearts and minds by way of the newspapers, stirring in the souls of the good grief and anguish, and in the souls of others an inclination toward evil, a desire for it, and an eager rush toward it.

This evil from which Egypt now suffers did not come from the nature of Egyptians, for in themselves they are good, nor from the nature of Islam, for it is more generous and purer than that; it came, rather, from this contagion.

And the whole of the good lies in our seeking a remedy for this plague as we seek remedies for the other plagues that sweep over peoples from time to time; people have already learned how to treat the plagues that sweep over bodies and drive them toward death. When, then, will they learn how to treat this plague that sweeps over souls, hearts, and minds, tempting them toward evil, driving them to spread and broadcast it, and filling the earth with corruption and injustice through

it?

This is what God, mighty and exalted, commands in the noble Qur'an, where He says in the glorious verse: "And let there be among you a community calling to what is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong; and it is they who shall prosper."