Coincidence

Musamarat al-Jayb, 21 April 1946.

1 Some people deny it most vehemently, seeing in such denial a triumph for science and a reflection of the spirit of the modern age; while others acknowledge it most fully, seeing in such acknowledgment a triumph for reality, a resistance to innovation, and a preservation of inherited tradition. And both these and those, it would seem, indulge in a great excess regarding themselves.

2 Coincidence is, without doubt, a thing that occurs; we encounter it every day and experience it in every moment of life. One of us leaves his house with some definite purpose in mind, with no intention of meeting so-and-so — indeed, this so-and-so may not have crossed his mind at all — yet he meets him somewhere along the way, by coincidence; neither man had thought of the other, nor had either intended the encounter, but they met without any will of their own, so there was a greeting, and there was conversation, and who knows — perhaps this conversation will have the farthest-reaching effect on the lives of the two men, on one of them or on both. So coincidence did occur; no one denies that it occurred, for it, as it is, contradicts neither science nor the spirit of modernity, just as it neither confirms a particular faith nor suits a particular antiquity — it is simply a thing like all those other things we witness at every moment, and we do not deny them because they result from natural laws that admit of no doubt or dispute; all that is the matter is that we do not notice these laws as they do their work and produce their results, so that if something of astonishment or wonder befalls us, the source of that is not that the natural laws have been violated, nor that something contrary to these laws has occurred, but rather that we ourselves failed to attend to what was happening around us, and did not observe it with precise attention, and so we found ourselves exposed to the astonishment and wonder we now feel.

3 All this talk was what Kamil used to say when he related to me a story that happened to his family when he was a boy attending his primary school in one of the provincial towns, and his wonder at this story never ceased, for all the coincidences he had encountered, and for all the experience he had since acquired. And it seems most likely that he kept the memory of this story because it had made his family taste, within a single year, two days — one of them among the happiest of its days, and

the other among the most wretched of these days — and the cause of the happiness and the wretchedness on these two days were two things strangely connected to one another.

4 Kamil liked to begin his story from its end, so as to arrive at its beginning, seeing in that something of a wonder that would prompt reflection and invite thought and consideration.

5 One day he came home from school joyful and delighted, turning over in his mind thoughts that were all contentment and gladness, for he was about to welcome one of the feast holidays — most likely, I think, it was the Feast of Sacrifice — and he was savoring within himself this freedom that had been granted him since that afternoon; for no sooner would he reach the house than he would cast his books and notebooks into some corner of his room and turn away from them with a turning-away that would last for days, and give himself over to various kinds of play and activity in the house, the street, and the field, which would likewise continue for days uninterrupted by the regular attendance at school, or by the need to study and prepare to answer the teachers.

6 He would call to mind the various kinds of play just as he called to mind the days of the feast, and the luxuries and gifts that would be granted him in them; and he reckoned that once he reached the house he would snatch a little food, then go off with his brothers to pursue that curious game of theirs they loved to play, in which they imitated the actors who had visited the town some months before, led by Shaykh Salama Hijazi — God rest his soul — who had performed for them Saladin, and performed for them Romeo and Juliet, and performed for them other stories of which the boys had memorized fragments; so they would re-enact these among themselves whenever the chance for play presented itself, adding to what they had memorized, and subtracting, and adding, and omitting, and changing, and altering — but in any case, they performed, and believed themselves to be excellent performers.

7 But Kamil reached the house that evening and found no food, nor did he share in any play, but spent hateful hours that weighed so heavily upon him that he was driven to one of the books he had meant to abandon, and began to look into this book as though he were studying a lesson, until the sunset prayer was performed and he was not called to supper, as though the family had forgotten to eat; then the final evening prayer was performed, and his father came in laughing, reminding the family that it was their custom to have supper, and that the children

ought not to go to sleep hungry.

8 And the family did sup, though in a strange, contradictory languor; for the head of the family was smiling, quick with a joke, ready with his wit, and the children wished for nothing more than to share in this good humor of his, but the mistress of the house was frowning, dark of face and spirit alike, not answering when spoken to, and replying to her husband only by gesture and nod; and Kamil saw, for the first time, this discord between his parents, for he had known them otherwise — he had seen them pleased together and displeased together, sharing in whatever good or ill befell the family, so that the joy filling the house was happiness, and the sorrow filling the house was wretchedness. But this evening showed the boy something new: it showed him that parents might disagree, one rejoicing while the other grieved, the father laughing while the mother wept, or the mother weeping while the father laughed.

9 The children retired at last to their bedroom and shut the door behind them, and settled onto their mats and wrapped themselves in their blankets, then began to talk as they were accustomed to do while waiting for sleep to come upon them; and in this talk Kamil learned the source of this disagreement between his parents, though he did not fully grasp its true nature until many long years had passed.

10 On that day, his father had lost, somewhere along the road, all the money he had been carrying, and this money was all that the family possessed, all that it had meant to welcome the feast with, and all that it had relied upon to satisfy these many differing needs that a large family, not of great wealth, nonetheless feels bound to meet, so as to present a somewhat dignified appearance when the seasons and feasts draw near.

11 The family had reviewed its situation and organized its needs, and knew that it would buy such-and-such from one man, and such-and-such from another merchant, and such-and-such from the public market to be held the next day. And the mistress of the house had begun preparing to fill her home with bustle and activity in these days preceding the feast, setting all her daughters to work, and setting to work alongside them some of those unfortunate women who found a blessing in such days, when they could assist in such a household in welcoming the seasons and the feasts.

12 Kamil and his brothers consoled themselves with much playfulness and mirth, for they would take some part in this bustle that would fill the house, each of them having his share of these tasks not

usually undertaken by boys, but reserved for women; but all these hopes collapsed, and all these plans were undone, when the head of the family lost the money he had been carrying — and it was no small sum, for it exceeded fifteen gold pounds, more than half of which represented his salary, the rest representing loans contracted here and there to welcome the days of the feast.

13 But all of this had slipped from the man's pocket somewhere along the road between the court where he worked and his home, and he had no idea how he had lost this gold — whether it had fallen from his pocket, or had been stolen from him, he who was not accustomed to handling gold or silver, nor to losing any sum of money, small or large.

14 Be that as it may, he lost the gold and returned to his family frowning, ashamed, and did not inform his wife of it except after much hesitation; and no sooner had she heard this news from him than her tears began to flow silently, with no sound to be heard, her lips not parting for any word, her body not trembling with any sob — only silent tears, flowing copiously, painting a magnificent and tragic picture of what becomes of these hopes that are disappointed, and these wishes that are suddenly swept away by the wind, and of what becomes of the breaking of the spirit when the spirit expects no breaking.

15 In that brief moment — her tears still flowing — this woman saw her house silent and still, after she had reckoned it would be full of bustling activity and clamor; and she saw her sons and daughters downcast and grieved, resenting this stillness they beheld, yet voicing none of their resentment aloud, for she had disciplined them, and disciplined them well, and had taught them never to ask about what did not concern them — and so they kept their grief to themselves.

16 And she saw those unfortunate women coming to the house seeking work and some relief in their livelihood, and finding neither work nor hope; and she wished to picture the days of the feast, yet did not know how to imagine them — should she picture them pale and sorrowful, or composed, feigning joy and affecting contentment?

17 She turned over all these thoughts in her broken spirit, her silent tears still flowing copiously, while her husband looked at her, ashamed and grieved, yet his tongue would not be still, for he was praising God for what He had taken just as he praised God for what He had given, and reciting verses from the Qur'an, and repeating various forms of prayer and supplication; then his wife rose heavily, leaving him to his praise and

supplication, and withdrew to her own room, neither praising nor supplicating, yet neither resenting nor rebelling, but only shedding what tears remained in her eyes, until, her tears spent, she fell silent and said nothing more; and her daughters came and gathered around her and shared in her sorrow, their own grief threatening to show itself, but they swiftly drove it back into the depths of their conscience and the recesses of their souls, and set about consoling their mother and encouraging her to bear this misfortune.

18 And so the last part of that day passed over this house, between a grieving mother who could find no outlet for her grief and no way to bear it, and a contented father who sought God's praise and supplication to help him endure this misfortune that had befallen him, and sons and daughters who consoled their mother and marveled at their father's conduct, showing on their faces and the tips of their tongues something other than what they concealed within their own souls and the secrets of their hearts.

19 Kamil understood his mother's grief and the family's misery, but he did not understand his father's contentment, and in particular did not understand this joy that filled the man's spirit, little by little, as time passed, until by the start of the night he was seen to be happy, or as good as happy!

20 The next morning, he heard him perform the dawn prayer and recite the Qur'an in his prayer as excellently as he had ever been accustomed to recite it, and praise God after his prayer as excellently as he had ever heard him praise God, and then tease his daughter when she brought him his coffee, laughing with her and with her grieving mother, as though the dearest and most cherished person to her had died — though the matter amounted to no more than a trivial incident, one of those incidents that occur every day! And beyond all this, it was a debt he had owed, and had not known how he would pay — for God had tested him when He enabled him to discharge this debt.

21 Then the old man fell silent for a moment, as though reviewing something within himself, and then said: "Your mother has quickly forgotten what good fortune befell us some months ago, when we were in the direst need, for God lent us a loan on that day — and then reclaimed that loan yesterday."

22 And the old man returned to his silence, then recited the words of God, Almighty and Exalted: "And whatever you spend of anything, He will

compensate it, and He is the best of providers." Then the old man went out in the morning to his work, and returned at midday rejoicing as was his custom, and most of what the family had meant to buy for the feast had already arrived at the house ahead of him; and when he met his wife, and she was about to question him, he placed dinars in her hand, kissing her, then recited again the words of God, Almighty and Exalted: "And whatever you spend of anything, He will compensate it, and He is the best of providers." His wife asked: "From whom did you borrow this money?" He said: "You will know that after the feast — but the children ought to welcome their feast joyfully, and ought not to suffer because their father lost the money he was carrying."

23 Kamil did not understand this story of the debt, nor did he grasp how God had lent his father gold some months before, only to reclaim it from him yesterday, when he had lost his own gold at the very time he needed it most; so he waited with his mother until the afternoon prayer was performed, and then went to her and asked about this loan — how it had come about, and how it had been repaid in this strange manner?! And when his mother related to him the story of that loan, he recalled certain things and was moved by certain things, and did not forget what he recalled, nor did those impressions fade from his spirit with the advance of his years and the accumulation of his experience.

24 His mother told him that the family had once passed through a day as harsh as any it had known — and the family passed through many such harsh days, especially when the young men among her sons returned to Cairo at the start of the school year!

25 On that day, the young men had returned to Cairo, having drained from the house all the good it had and all the gold their father possessed, and the family found itself not knowing how it would live the next day, nor how it would discharge some of what it owed in debt; for there was no avoiding the payment of school fees, and giving these young men what they needed to spend, and providing what they required of clothing and provisions. And the family had risen to all this with a resolve verging on heroism, but by that evening it found itself exhausted, having lost its strength and its capacity to endure, and awoke the next day divided between the grief of parting and this lingering wretchedness.

26 The old man went out to his work the next morning but returned joyful. He had come upon a red handkerchief along the way, its corners stirred by the breeze, and he bent down to it, and found that one of its

corners was knotted around something that felt like money; so the man looked before him and behind him and saw no one, and looked to his right and saw the canal flowing calm and still, and saw no one, and looked to his left and saw the railway line stretching from north to south, or from south to north, lying still as though asleep, or nearly so, and saw no one! And he undid the knot and found some fifteen-odd gold pounds, and he hesitated only briefly, and then the gold had slipped into his pocket, and the handkerchief had been knotted around a heavy stone and sunk to the bottom of the canal, and he returned home joyful and glad, seeing that God had granted him a release from his distress and a way out of his hardship, repeating the words of God, Almighty and Exalted: "Indeed, with hardship comes ease." And the family was happy, at ease, content in spirit, and reassured that God provides for whom He wills without reckoning.

27 But the old man returned to his wife as night advanced, grieved, downcast, his voice broken, scarcely able to speak before his tears outran his words; for he had learned, while conversing with his friends, that a certain man from a neighboring village had sold his cow at the market, and then lost its price somewhere along the road, and that his family had thus fallen into wretched misery. The old man realized that this fortune that had come his way had been taken from that unfortunate man who had lost both his cow and his money, and had he been able, the old man would have returned the money to its owner, but he had already spent most of it in discharging some of the debt he had been carrying; and he said to his wife, in a broken voice wet with tears: "I shall be wretched over this gold that I took without right, to the end of my days."

28 Kamil said: "And so I understood, when my mother told me this story, that one coincidence had erased from my simple-hearted father's heart the trace of another coincidence, and that one incident had taken its revenge upon another incident, and that this good man, whose conscience had suffered over the unlawful money he had spent, had found his spirit at peace over what he had lost the day before, reassured that God had cleansed him of this sin in this world, so that He would not question him about it on the Day of Reckoning."

29 Kamil said: "And from that day on, I made it a habit of mine never to look at anything people happen to drop before them on the ground, fearing lest something like what befell my father should befall me, by coincidence!"