A Meeting After Despair

Al-Balagh, 20 May 1945.

I knew him from afar, as all cultivated people the world over came to know him; for his cultural and political personality imposed itself upon these cultivated people by sheer force, ever since the last World War.

Perhaps I first heard his name even before that war, before I had come into direct contact with European culture, when the Egyptian students then studying in the city of Lyon used to speak of Egypt's political affairs, and found in the mayor of that city a care for them, a solicitude toward them, and a kindness shown to them. Then I heard his name again when I was a student in Paris during the war, when he was one of the wartime ministers, and when the French spoke his name with no little smiling affection and sparkling wit. For his name was always, in French hearts, bound up with love, with wit, and with smiling warmth — because he himself was always smiling, always playful, always affectionate.

Then I heard his name afterward spoken of among generations of graduates of the École Normale Supérieure, likewise bound up with wit, smiles, and affection, and I heard these generations of graduates jesting about this distinguished minister's own playfulness when he had been a student at that school, and his teasing of his fellow students and his professors — bound up as well with a great deal of praise for his sweet eloquence, his fresh literary sensibility, and his excellent scholarly research. Then I read his book on the celebrated French beauty Madame Récamier, and I admired the book immensely, and held the author in the very highest esteem, and followed whatever else he published, and awaited eagerly whatever was expected to appear next, and from that time I became, from afar, a friend of his. Then Édouard Herriot's name grew ever more frequent in the French and world press, for from the year 1924 onward he had become a figure of the greatest weight and influence in French and world politics — yet for all that I did not actually meet him until the summer of 1937.

And I met him in Paris, when the Friends of the French Schools of the East gathered under his presidency, and no sooner had I heard him speak, and spoken with him myself, than I became certain that the image that had formed itself in my mind of him was a remarkably faithful likeness.

After that we met often, in those conferences held in Paris around the World's Fair — the conference on university education, the conference on intellectual cooperation, and the Permanent Committee for Arts and Letters. I had no notion then that the bond between him and myself would grow any further than this — but no sooner had I returned to Egypt at the end of that summer, and settled there for some months, than I learned he would be visiting Egypt, to lay the foundation stone of the French school then being established in Heliopolis. People still remember his arrival in this country in April of 1938, the government's and the University's warm reception of him, the honoring of him by Egyptian intellectuals, and the University's bestowal upon him of an honorary doctorate. I met him at all of these celebrations, as did other Egyptians — except that the bestowal of the doctoral degree upon him created a special bond between him and myself. For I was then Dean of the Faculty of Arts, which had bestowed this honorary degree upon him. And from that time on he liked to claim that I had become his own dean, and that he now owed me, as he put it, a certain submission. Nor do I forget that he greeted me afterward at the French Legation with this charming remark: "My dear Dean: you shall find no colleague among your faculty more zealous than I in obeying you."

I visited with him the University's excavations at Tuna al-Gebel, and we stayed as guests of our friend Professor Sami Gabra, and spent a full day at those excavations, in the course of which I saw Édouard Herriot up close as a visitor to antiquities, probing in his inquiry, reading the Greek inscriptions, laboring to read the hieroglyphic ones with the help, in this and that, of Professors Gauthier, Drioton, and Sami Gabra — asking, clarifying, pressing for further explanation, debating whatever was put to him, noting down whatever he heard. All of this in a scorching heat, for it was the month of May, in days much like those we witnessed this past week, and in the desert. Édouard Herriot had begun his tour of the antiquities at dawn and did not rest until he was called to lunch — and he was perhaps even put out by that invitation to lunch, since it interrupted the research and inquiry he would have preferred to continue. But we ourselves delighted in those few hours we spent with him around the table, and in the shade of one of the chambers, listening to him and speaking with him on various kinds of subjects — on literature, on history — though he himself was always eager to flee from literature and history, to ask the archaeologists about their antiquities, and the agriculturalists about their agriculture, for we had with us someone versed in agriculture who could speak to it. By four o'clock, Édouard Herriot had already told

his companions to resume the search and the visit to the antiquities, and on he went, and on we went with him, until night fell; there we sat to rest beside that Roman waterwheel which Professor Sami Gabra had discovered, which was set turning at that hour, letting us hear its mournful song, and the murmur of water in that scorched and exhausted desert, while Édouard Herriot, in the meantime, let us hear his own sweet talk — talk that touched neither on politics nor on any particular strand of culture, but rose above all of that, brushing against all of it only gently. I recall, from that conversation, his telling us that, having reached the age of sixty-six, there were three things he grieved over more than anything else: that he had not had from music the share he had wished for; that he had not learned as many foreign languages as he would have liked; and that he had never managed to secure for himself a house in the French countryside. As for his never having secured a country house, there is no doubt of that. As for his not having learned foreign languages as he would have liked, it is enough to know that he was proficient in English, German, Italian, and Spanish, and was at that time studying Russian — and his visit to Egypt then drove him to study hieroglyphics as well. I say nothing of Greek and Latin, for he was himself a towering figure in classical studies. As for his not being skilled in music, it is enough to know that his book on Beethoven is the finest thing France has produced on that great musician. But you may recognize the truly accomplished man of culture by this one trait above all others that sets him apart: an insatiable hunger for knowledge, however much of it he has already gained, and a dissatisfaction with his own output, however excellent and however polished it may be.

And Édouard Herriot carried his tour of Egypt's antiquities through to its very end, imposing upon himself, and upon his companions, a heavy toll of effort. Yet he returned to France, and had not been there many months before he produced his book about that visit — and it proved to be among the finest things to read, one of the greatest books produced in these days on the Near East for sheer pleasure and delight.

And the trait that most distinguishes Édouard Herriot, if I may say so, is his love of paying his debts. No sooner had a year passed since his visit to Egypt, and the warm reception he had received there, than the French Government bestowed upon the then Minister of Education, and upon the Minister of Communications, the decoration of the Legion of Honour — one of the two ministers having received him at the University and presented him, in its name, with the doctoral diploma, the other

having eased his travels throughout the country. And no sooner had that happened than the University of Lyon invited the Dean of the Faculty of Arts to attend the opening of its academic year in November of 1938, and bestowed upon him an honorary doctorate. And so I came to spend, with the mayor of Lyon in his own city, a day very like the one he had spent with me in Cairo, and at Tuna al-Gebel.

Yet Édouard's love of paying debts is a fundamental element of his political personality as well. All the French know this trait of his; many of them love it, and many of them also resent it — for he will not allow himself to be shifty about his own private debt, nor will he allow his country to be shifty about its public debt. The French disagreed over the repayment of the last war's debts to America, or over the manner of repaying them. One faction wished these debts to be cancelled, wholly or in part, and Clemenceau stood at the head of that faction. Another faction wished these debts to be honored, believing that evasion of debt did not befit France's standing, nor her future interest. Herriot stood at the head of this latter faction, and his own ministry fell precisely because of his insistence on honoring the debt.

And if you wish to know another fundamental element of Herriot's political personality, it is his love of peace, and his readiness to sacrifice, for the sake of this peace, a very great deal of national vanity and pride. For he it was who quarreled with Poincaré over the occupation of the Ruhr Valley, and would not rest until the French armies had evacuated that part of Germany — preferring soundness of relations, caring for the rehabilitation of the defeated, and avoiding the schemes being plotted against France by some of her own allies. And he it was who sought, and pressed hard in seeking, to draw France and Soviet Russia closer together — visiting Russia more than once, defending the resumption of relations with her, and the resumption of traditional diplomacy between her and his own country, a defense that exposed him to a great deal of hardship, and to every kind of scheme plotted against him by capital, and by his conservative opponents.

And Édouard Herriot was the voice of the French partisans of peace within the League of Nations, and chairman of the League's Committee for Intellectual Cooperation, and his political and cultural speeches at Geneva still ring in the ears of those who heard them, and still live in the minds of those who have read them, to this day.

And there is another element that completes Édouard Herriot's political personality, bound up with French domestic politics: for Édouard Herriot is a democrat in the fullest and most precise sense of that word, scarcely separated from the Socialists except by his retention of private property, and his caution against letting the state dominate everything. It was he who decreed free secondary education in France, and who left indelible traces upon French education as a whole; for he is among the staunchest supporters of the single unified school, among the most firmly convinced of the civic character education must have, and among the most forceful champions of making education, in all its branches and grades, an open right for all citizens alike, barred to none by poverty, by weakness, or by any social class whatsoever.

This, then, is Édouard Herriot's political personality, summarized here in the briefest possible outline. As for his literary personality, it is truly magnificent; I do not know that I have ever met a man who possessed a culture as wide without limit, as deep without measure, and as rich without bound, as that possessed by Édouard Herriot. And what can one say of a man who can speak on any branch of learning whatever, on any kind of French or foreign literature, on any of the fine arts, on any branch of politics or administration, speaking as one who has mastered what he says and understands what he hears — not the speech of one who feigns, or affects, or borrows, but one who is original in whatever subject he takes up. His own books themselves portray, more splendidly than any description could, this wide, deep, rich culture, of so many different colors and such varied fruits. He writes on French literature, on French history, on French art; he writes on the history of ancient Alexandrian culture; he visits the Balkans, and writes on the Balkans, and on Greece in particular; he visits the East, and writes on the East, on its ancient and modern history, and on its connection with Europe; he visits Egypt, and writes on Egypt, ancient and modern; he writes on music — and all this while, in his advancing years, amid the heavy burdens of presiding over the Chamber of Deputies and administering the city of Lyon, amid the books he produces and the historical sources on the French Revolution he studies in that city, he is learning Russian, learning hieroglyphics, and attempting to learn Arabic. And with all of this, he is the calmest of men, the most at ease, the most abundantly blessed with an even temper; you never meet him but content, never see him but smiling, never speak with him but you hear from him some rare piece of wit, some charming jest, some talk that nourishes both mind and spirit. And while Édouard Herriot was carrying on with this calm, vigorous,

fertile life of his, the Second World War arrived, and he met it as he had met the first — resolute, determined, smiling, convinced that the final word would belong to right and justice, and that his country would emerge triumphant from this second war, just as it had emerged triumphant from the first.

But catastrophes descend, and misfortunes befall; and lo, the French armies were overwhelmed, and lo, Marshal Pétain sought the armistice, and accepted the victor's terms, and lo, the system of government in France was transformed, and a regime of tyranny arose there before the very eyes of the enemy, and lo, the free leaders of France scattered — some of them managing to flee, others seized by the enemy. But Édouard Herriot remained faithful to his pledge to a greater France of sound democratic order, carrying on the business of his office at the Chamber of Deputies as he had done before the calamity struck, while warnings reached him, secretly and openly, which he paid no heed to and took no notice of; and when President Roosevelt invited him to America, to remain there until the storm should pass, he declined, with thanks.

Then the ordeal reached its utmost extreme: he was seized and interned, and tested in both body and mind, deprived of the care his age required, and of the nourishment his mind required, a prisoner in the hands of the French collaborators with Germany, and in the hands of the Germans themselves.

Then he was transported to Germany, and kept there, between Potsdam and Berlin, in one hospital or another, until the Red Army came and rescued him from captivity, and restored him to freedom.

The Red Army took him by surprise, and restored him to freedom in haste, carrying him some considerable distance from the hospital. But he, ever faithful to the payment of his debts, had not bid farewell to the German hospital director, nor thanked him for having cared for him well — and so he asked leave of the Russian commander, and pressed his request until the commander brought him back to the hospital, where he thanked his German host, and bade him a gracious farewell — though in his own heart, even so, there burned a hatred of the Germans that no means could ever extinguish.

I met Édouard Herriot this past Thursday at noon, and sat with him after this ordeal just as I had sat with him before it, around the lunch table, and I spoke with him and listened to him after lunch, and found him just as I had always known him, unchanged. As I bade him farewell, I

asked him: Will you give us a new book before long? He said, laughing, and placing his hand on my shoulder: Very soon indeed, my dear friend.