

Ten Days (2)

Mosamarat al-Gaib, 20 July 1947.

*My longing goes forth with the Yemeni caravan, led along beside it; but
my body remains bound fast in Mecca.*

You have not left behind in Cairo some single beloved dear and cherished to you; you have left behind Cairo itself, and with it the whole of Egyptian life. And the whole of Egyptian life is something you are yourself a part of, your own self bound up with it in a close and intricate connection, so that you never leave it except to return to it, and you never turn your thoughts away from it except to ask yourself, moments later, what beings it may hold, or what events may have befallen its people.

In any case, you have taken up the morning papers and begun to read them, knowing full well in yourself that you will spend days upon days, and weeks, without reading any more; and for this reason you read them hurriedly, and you read them slowly, and you set them aside to read again on the ship, and you laugh at yourself for this foolishness, more befitting children than grown men — but then you return to excuse yourself, or to excuse it on your own behalf, by reflecting that men are nothing but overgrown children, especially in the hours of parting and all the leave-taking and send-off that surrounds them. Then at last you reach Alexandria, at a time you find short, and yet long all the same — short because you have not given Cairo its due share of your thoughts within it, and long because you are exhausted, worn out, longing to escape all this weariness into whatever might distract you from it, and lift its weight from your shoulders.

And you find this distraction once you reach Alexandria, for there you find yourself received by people much like those you left behind in Cairo, who have disturbed their own calm and comfort to see you off, some of them in a brief meeting, others accompanying you all the way to the ship! Among these companions is one who meets you at the Alexandria station and then arranges to meet you again at the ship, and another who meets you and then swears his most solemn oaths to stay with you until he delivers you to the ship itself, wishing to enjoy your company, to help you bear whatever hardship you encounter, to distract you with whatever talk he has to offer and whatever news he has to relate, and to press an invitation to lunch upon you until you can do

nothing but accept — because you are a stranger passing through Alexandria while he lives there, and because those passing through owe something to those who reside, a due that must be paid; and so you spend these hours residing in Alexandria while remaining, in truth, far from it.

And you have divided yourself into three parts: one part has gone ahead of you to the ship, and waits for you there; another parted from you the moment you boarded the train, and remained behind in Cairo; and the third part, slight and frail, lingers somewhere in between, hurrying to reach the ship, yet wishing it could return to Cairo all the same, and listening, through all of this, to those who speak to you, and answering them in kind — but listening with only a small part of its ears, and speaking only with the edges of its tongue and lips. These hours pass as best they can, resembling nothing so much as some hateful dream from which wakefulness longs to free you, even as you wish, all the same, that sleep might hold you fast within it. Then at last you board a car that carries you to the ship, and shortly after you come upon those noble gatekeepers whom the state has stationed as guardians of the port, who grant leave to those departing Egypt to depart, and grant leave to those entering Egypt to enter, being gentle with some and strict with others.

And in all of this they render the state and the homeland a noble service and a grave duty. I do not know how they see others off when they travel, nor how they receive others when they return, but I know that I myself have met with nothing but kindness from them — indeed, kindness that goes beyond mere gentleness into something closer to affection and love; for when they see me off, their sweet farewell adds its own sorrow to whatever sorrow I already feel at parting from the homeland, and when they receive me, their gracious welcome adds its own joy to whatever joy I already feel at returning to the homeland. Then you press through these massed, crowded throngs until you climb aboard the ship, and from that moment you feel that between you and the homeland there remains but a slender thread, soon to be severed by the clang of the bell, and that resounding whistle that spreads through the air, filling the hearts of travelers and those who remain behind alike with awe and grief.

Take your fill now of the fragrance of Najd's wild rue, for after this evening there will be no more of it.

Then you hear the clanging of the bells, and that resounding whistle in the open air, and the farewell takes place, with all the bitterness and

heaviness that farewell carries. And, strangely enough, there is a clear and evident difference between the farewell aboard ship and the farewell at the Cairo station; for in Cairo, you chafe bitterly against the hour of farewell, wishing the train would hasten its departure, or the wheel of time hasten its turning, so that you might be spared this heavy hour.

And you breathe a sigh of relief when the train begins to move — not because you are relieved of those bidding you farewell and seeing you off, but because you are relieved of the farewell and the send-off itself. Aboard the ship, however, you are in no hurry at all for the clanging of the bells or the resounding whistle; you remain settled and calm, drawing out the threads of conversation, wishing they were elastic enough to be stretched out without end. Explain this difference however you like, but it remains a plain fact; and whatever the case, you have remained aboard the ship while those seeing you off have disembarked from it, to remain calm and at ease upon the soil of the homeland.

And this ship has begun to turn gently, to face the sea and turn its back upon the shore, while you still stand there, wishing to take from Egypt as much as you possibly can, as the coastline begins, little by little, to vanish from sight, and the ship drives you onward toward what you know and what you do not know; for you know it is bound for Marseille, but you do not know what you may encounter on the way to Marseille. Will the sea remain calm and tranquil, or will it grow turbulent, whipped up by storm? Will you hold steady through the crossing, or will you be seized by that seasickness over which you have no power, and which can spoil everything for you? Will you find solitude with yourself, or will you meet with people? Will solitude with yourself be granted you, or will meeting with people be forced upon you?

As for myself, I took from solitude with myself and from meeting with people a share I do not know whether to call pleasing or displeasing, but in which I found great delight all the same; for solitude with oneself is no easy thing, and I am almost inclined to believe that I attain it only rarely — for to me, solitude with myself means withdrawing into a book, and keeping company with people I have never known before. And during this voyage I kept company with a people whose company I love most dearly — those who spread the light of Islam across the earth, and established in it the glory of the Arabs; for I was reading a book about the Commander of the Faithful, Uthman — may God have mercy upon him.

And I met people and enjoyed meeting them; I spoke to them at length, and heard from them even more than I spoke; and Egypt was the sole subject of all that I said and all that I heard. And the sea grew so calm that it nearly made us forget we were crossing it at all — until, when we were not far from France, with but a single night remaining between us and her shores, the sea rose up in such turmoil that it made us forget everything we had enjoyed of calm and tranquility; and we had scarcely drawn near Marseille, and the ship had scarcely come to anchor, when news reached us that weighed heavily upon our hearts — for we had meant to travel on to Paris that very night, but a strike had halted the running of the trains, and forced us to resign ourselves to remaining in Marseille, one day, and another day, and yet another.