

TAHA HUSAIN AND MODERN EGYPT

BY MARTIN SPRENGLING

IN the New Orient more than elsewhere, outstanding individuals are representing and carrying the modern urge and drive of the ancient peoples of Asia. Gandhi is far from standing alone in Asia though few can even remotely approach his stature. At the opposite end, Mustapha Kemal, the Gazi, is as different from Gandhi as night is from day: but in him is summed up new Turkey. Ibn Saoud of Arabia is distinct from both, but he is modern Arabia. In Persia Shah Pahlavi, and in China, Chiang Kai Shek are not out of place in this august company.

Egypt, since the death of Saad Zaghloul, seems to be without effective leadership. In the purely political sphere this is true. In the realm of humanity and human interest, Egypt is not so poor. The pages of her distinguished journals and of many notable books published in the great center of Arabic culture, Cairo, give ample evidence that on that side old Egypt has a score or more of earnest workers striving for their own and their country's uplift. All this is done in much more quiet fashion, in difficult Arabic, in a land under the shadow of a great colonial power, and does not so easily find its way into our public prints as did the lightning flashes of Zaghloul's banishments, recalls, and repeated elections in the murky atmosphere of the years just after the war. It is a clean, strong movement making steady and effective headway against reactionary obstacles set in its path without let or hindrance, perhaps even abetted in high places since the death of Servet Pasha.

This movement has a leader second to none in the great New Orient. One of the rarest of the great blind men which the Near East has produced since Homer is Taha Husain. Only forty-three years old, in or out of official position, of which he has never held any but that of a teacher, he is the accepted and adored leader of all that is finest and noblest in the striving of modern Egyptian youth. Born in 1889 in a village of upper Egypt, he himself sketches for us his childhood and youth in a book which in Arabic he called *The Days*, we would say *Red-Letter Days*. He has the rare gift of describing with the warmth and life that only one who has lived what he writes can give, a typical childhood in a poor village on the Nile, while at the same time he delineates in deft, delicate strokes

with unvarnished truthfulness the development of his own marked personality. As a work of art, this book easily ranks in its class with Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, and as a book which should and presently will be read by high-minded and worth-while youth the world over, it ranks higher. Those who read English can now enjoy it and judge for themselves, for it has just appeared in an admirable British translation by Paxton over Taha's own signature under the title *An Egyptian Childhood*, published in London by Routledge and Sons.

It leaves him, a 13-year old lad, at the great old medieval mosque-school of al-Azhar. Much of the teaching there was antiquated, dry-as-dust booklearning. The boy's unerring instinct found for him a *sheikh*, Seyid Ali al-Marsafy, who knew how to flavor his medieval lectures with a sanely critical attitude and with a distinct departure from over much grammar and rhetoric. Under this kindly guidance there were laid open before the blind boy's eager mind the stately halls of medieval Arabic literature, and he presently came to see embodied in these cloistered tomes and teeming through the aisles of their pages, the living spirits of men, as few or none had seen them before him. Ten years of lovingly arduous toil at al-Azhar in an incredible state of isolation and malnutrition due to the ignorance of parents, teachers, and the society in which he lived as to the problems of a sensitive blind boy, were the next formative element in the rich life of Taha Husain.

During the last four of these years, he added to the studies at al-Azhar work at the newly founded Egyptian State University. There great European teachers, Nallino, Littmann, the elder Guidi, and Santillana, showed him the beauty and value of modern science and research. Again it seems incredible, but the writer has it from Littmann's own lips, that Taha the blind was by far the keenest and quickest student of Syriac language and literature. With Guidi he learned South-Arabic, in writing, structure, and vocabulary as unlike his native North-Arabic as Latin is to English. His first book on the great blind poet-philosopher Abu-l-Ala al-Ma'arri constituted a doctor's dissertation of which any university in the world might be proud and, together with a disputation on it, procured him a doctorate in 1914.

His work in France, whither he was now sent, coincides almost entirely with the war. He was a student at Montpellier 1914-1915. Financial difficulties caused him three months of agony in Egypt.

The liberality of the late Sultan Husain enabled him to return at the beginning of 1916. From here onward his life in France became paradise to him. Aided by the daughter of the house in which he found lodging he pursued a rigorous course of studies, which led him from the house to the Sorbonne, to the College de France, to the Library of Sainte Genevieve, and back to the house again, where evenings were spent in reading French literature. In 1917, after he had attained the licentiate in literature, he asked for and obtained permission from his home authorities to marry the lady who had become the light of his life. With her his work went on to the completion of his doctorate with a magnificent study on the world's first sociologist, the North-African Arab Ibn Khaldun. And still he strove on until, with Latin and Greek at his command he attained the diploma of the highest grade in the study of ancient history early in 1919.

Since 1919 he has taught at the Egyptian University, first as Professor of Ancient History, then with the reorganization as Professor of Arabic Literature and presently as head of his department. Last year, the reactionary minority now in control, saw fit to demote him to an office job, from which it presently accepted his outraged resignation.

All this sounds like the making of a tremendously learned man. And a man learned beyond the measure of all but a few in the world's history, is Taha Husain. In this he takes a rightful, modest pride. But he is not a mere shirtfront stuffed with vain knowledge. His books, essays, and articles exhibit on every page a rare mastery of a wide range of subjects, but they are not crammed with footnotes and bibliographies, as once those of his forebears were with long lists of the transmitters of their knowledge from the original happenings in Mohammed's day down to the split second in which they were writing. Taha is far more than that.

For one thing, he is a supreme creative artist in literature. This is difficult to demonstrate in translation. A good translation, that comes very near to transmuting not merely the bare sense, but the truth and beauty of the original into British English, is that of Taha's childhood story to which reference has been made. The American reader may want to compare this writer's translation of the first and last chapter of the same book, which will soon appear in the *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures*.

But Taha Husain is more than a great scholar and a rare artist

in words. If Gandhi is the Mahatma of India, Taha is no less the great-souled, saintly leader of the coming generation in Egypt, despite his blindness, nearer in some respects to the realities than Gandhi. Writing always in language and style intelligible to all intelligent Arab readers, he is at his best when he talks directly, as he often does, to the general reading public rather than to the student specialist. Now with motherly tenderness, now mercilessly severe, he urges, lifts, and leads his people up from the slough of sloth and despond.

In 1924, he contributed by request a series of popular articles to the *Hilal*, a magazine read from Bombay to Morocco, regularly on file in the Oriental Institute Library at the University of Chicago, in grade largely on a par with Harper's or the Atlantic Monthly. He chose for his subject *Leaders of Thought*. In eight articles, some running through more than one number, he dealt successively with Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Alexander the Great, Caesar, Between Two Eras, and The New Era. Now, frankly, would you expect Scribner's or Harper's to run such a series? And would you as a representative of the American reading public run to read them unless they promised laughs at philosophers in Hades? The Arabic *Hilal* did publish these studies, and Arab readers did buy, beg, and borrow the magazine in numbers to read them.

And what did Taha have to say? Let us look at the essay on Homer. He begins by warning his readers what not to expect. They would expect to find under such a head a few biographical data, a few snatches of quotations, the sort of thing that Plutarch gives: fragments of a single individual detached from his surroundings and background, as if that environment did not exist. Now he, Taha, has learned that such a picture is a false and distorted picture, and he would have his readers learn the same. The group, the folk and surroundings in which the individual leader lives and sings or writes or philosophizes or makes war or politics is as important as himself. Hence we are going to observe the group and the individual and as much as we may of the entire surroundings and so gain as full a picture of human life as possible.

And with what thinker or philosopher shall we begin? There are many. There are more than ten. Nay, there are more than a hundred. In truth, their number cannot be counted. Many such individuals are unknown to us. Many a thinker may, nay, must there be, who was of great influence in the rise of his group, in preparing

them for inevitable changes: the course of time has wiped out their personality and buried it from our view so effectively, that we may know of their circumstances little or nothing at all.

With such a person or group of persons, says he, I shall introduce my leaders of the world's thought. I mean those persons about whose names and personalities little or nothing is known, who indited the Iliad and the Odyssey. You may be surprised, that I begin with personalities so vague, inditers and reciters of epic poetry. Why do I start with Homer and the Homerids? Think back a moment to that Greece to which modern civilization may in such large measure be traced. Compare it with the roots of Islamic civilization! In the nomadic stage underlying Islamic as well as Greek culture, how do men first voice their thoughts, their emotions, their life and the things that move and change it? In poetry and song!

Homer has been shown by modern research to be a mere name. Yet what a name! Not only Greek, all European, nay, also all Arabic civilization is permeated by an astonishing amount of the beauty, the grandeur, the forms and ideas created by the man or group called Homer. We may not know them, but we can easily picture them to ourselves from their works. Imagine a group that cannot read or write, that has no philosopher and wants none, that desires in its life no more than eating and drinking, plenty and safety. They are living this crude life in an ancient, not very beautiful nor very orderly Greek town. One day, there comes to them a man with a musical instrument in his hand. He begins to play. People gather round to listen. Presently he adds to the tune a song. He sings in sweet, simple, beautiful words the tale of a little group of heroes, in whom are personified the splendor, power, and courage which are the ideals of his hearers and subtly weaving in ethical, social, political ideas and sentiments, which give these hearers new, but still natural ideals. The people, crowding round, are entranced. They applaud him, bid him stay, make him welcome, give him presents. He stays a while and then moves on to another, similar town. And with him move and spread the new beauty, the new ideals, the new civilizing agents. And what civilizing agents! Look what they led to in the days of Athens' glory! Look what they led to through the Renaissance in Europe! If you look close, though the mediæval Arabs knew little directly of Homer, you will find much of this forgotten hero of thought in mediæval Arab civilization. And how much more of his grand uplifting power is seizing

upon us again in this modern age! Do you not now think I was right in classing the poets of the Iliad and Odyssey among the great leaders of human thought?—But you ask me, what are the Iliad and Odyssey? Ah, that I shall not tell you. I want you to read the Iliad and Odyssey. They were written to delight you and men like you. So Taha cajoles and entices his people to walk with him on the road to culture and its glory.

But not always is Taha so bland and his mood so gentle. At another time, shortly after, we find him writing a column in the weekly *Siyasa*, which corresponds in the Arab world to the *New York Sunday Times*. Here Taha speaks of the golden age of Islam, the age of Baghdad the resplendent, of Haroun al-Rasheed and the fabulous glory of the Arabian Nights. The Arabs of today look back with the greatest pride on this day of their power and splendor. They picture it to themselves as an age of ideal orthodoxy, justice, and all that is ideally good and great in the history of their religion and their empire. Now Taha in these *Wednesday Talks* unsheathes the flashing sword of truth. He knows, as no one else now living, the literature of and on that age. He uses this literature as a merciless mirror to flash upon his people the terrible truth of that age. And what is that truth? That it was an age of the breakdown of nomad crudity, simplicity, and relative sobriety; that the impact of rapidly acquired power, luxury, riches, and sedentary civilization upon a nomad people had led to a grave crisis in Islam; that this age was one in which poets openly sang with sneering, materialistic cynicism of all good and decent things in life; that it was an age of profligacy, drunkenness, and every vice; that this vice was not the property of a small class, that it was deeply ingrained in the courts of royalty and nobles, that theology and religion were not free from it, that it had permeated every class of society. He is criticized for this fearless candor on the shortcomings of the Islamic past. Made more fearless by censure he has the gravest, best-written and argued criticism printed one Wednesday. In the next number he replies:—When and under what circumstances does a people borrow peacock plumage for its glory from the fancied glory of its golden age? When does it guard with the most foolish jealousy against the idea that any stain or blemish may be found on the morals and manners of its forebears? Take the case of the Greeks! In the days of the Roman Empire, when Greece was laid low, when there were no more Alexanders, Platos, Phidiases, then it is that the

second-rate historian Plutarch criticizes the great Greek "father of history" Herodotus. And what is his criticism? This epigone accuses the naïvely sincere Herodotus of indiscretion, nay, of lying, because he tells most unseemly tales of Greek heroes of the Persian wars, who lived in or near his time. Herodotus depicts these men as actual human beings, avid for power and glory in the pursuit of which they resort on occasion to treachery, deceit, and bribery; when their efforts fail and they are cornered, they exhibit ordinary human cowardice or even more than ordinary cravenness. In a time of general decadence this appears to Plutarch impossible, unworthy of the high estate of idealized forebears, and so he accuses Herodotus of falsehood and indiscretion. Thus the Greeks! And now Taha follows up his parable with a confession more terrible, more sincere than any the writer has ever read in Augustine or the Books of Samuel. For himself in particular and for all Moslems and Arabs in general, especially those of Egypt, he says: This is our estate. We have neither name nor fame, and so we appropriate the fame of our ancestors as an adornment and a glory for ourselves. Hence any description of this ancestral fame in natural human terms appears to us to detract not from our ancestors alone, but from them and us together. Is it not so? Else what is our glorification of the Arabs? What is our glorying in the Pharaohs? What is our boasting over the remains of their greatness? It is a species of self-deception by which we conceal from ourselves the state of ignorance, decadence, and weakness in which we find ourselves.

We leave the matter there. Taha Husain is a simple teacher, now a teacher out of a job. He lets politics severely alone. But tell me, is he not a great teacher, though he have no class? And do you know a greater prophet in the New Orient? When kings and counsellors of the present shall be long forgotten, he and his work will still be living and working with Homeric vigor and beauty.