

A Bit of Wit

They say that the great German philosopher Kant had trained himself to go out for his daily constitutional at a fixed hour — never earlier, never later. The inhabitants of his city had grown accustomed to this. So when they saw him one day set out earlier than usual, they were astonished, and became certain that some momentous event had befallen the people of the earth, or the stars of the heavens. Within days the townspeople learned that matters had indeed unfolded as they had surmised, and that the day on which the philosopher's routine was disrupted was the very day the fires of the French Revolution were kindled, and the French stormed that fortress of tyranny and oppression which stood in Paris — the Bastille.

Yesterday we noted that *Al-Ahram* had departed from its familiar ways and its established policy toward the Government — a relationship built on amity and goodwill rather than rivalry and opposition. And we said, as the German philosopher's countrymen said: "There must be something to it — the philosopher has moved up his hour of departure!" Or as the ancient Arabs put it: "There must be a reason why Qusayr cut off his own nose."

Then the Ministry's newspaper noticed what we had noticed, and it teased *Al-Ahram* and rebuked it, then censured and scolded it, then demanded plain statement in place of insinuation, and direct expression in place of obscurity. Then *Al-Ayyam* turned on its fellow journal *Al-Ahram* with words that can only be described as bittersweet — containing both entreaty and warning. What passes between the Ministry's newspaper and *Al-Ahram* in the way of sharp-edged banter and light or heavy reproach is no concern of ours.

What does concern us is that *Al-Ahram* is "burning through the rounds," as the French say — galloping forward like a thoroughbred, racing from gentle wit to fierce criticism. This very morning it has openly declared its opposition to both the Government and the British alike, an opposition of the most consequential kind unless one or both parties move to contain it. It suffices to know that *Al-Ahram* has taken the Government and the British to task on twelve counts in a single brief article — a full dozen, as they say! We shall enumerate these charges for you, so that you may understand that the matter is grave and no laughing affair, unless circumstances remedy what lies between *Al-Ahram* and the Government before the rift deepens beyond repair.

1 — The only aspect of the recent Cabinet reshuffle that concerns the British is what has befallen the Ministry of the Interior. The British care nothing for the Ministry of Agriculture nor the Ministry of Religious Endowments — that is, the two ministries entrusted to members of the People's Party — but they care deeply about the Ministry of the Interior. The Interior Minister took pains to satisfy them, choosing for that post a minister whom the *Morning Post* vouched for as experienced, knowledgeable, capable, and seasoned — a man who knows where the British place themselves in Egypt, and where ministers place themselves in relation to the British. This man chosen by Sidqi Pasha to placate the British is His Excellency al-Qaysi Pasha, the new Interior Minister.

2 — The British are keen that the general policy of the state run as they wish and desire, and in the manner that fulfils their aims and satisfies their inclinations. They are confident of this and at

ease about it, for the conduct of such policy rests with the Prime Minister alone, and the British have been in full and firm agreement with the Prime Minister for more than two years.

3 — The British are keen that tribute be paid to the Sudan, and that the Sudan spend this tribute as it pleases, without Parliament or the Cabinet objecting to any of it or demanding that the Sudanese Government render any accounting for it. And Sidqi Pasha guarantees the British all of this.

4 — The British dislike any mention by Parliament or the Cabinet of Egypt's outstanding debt from the Sudan, or any demand by Parliament on the Cabinet for any portion of that debt. And Sidqi Pasha guarantees the British that this debt will remain forgotten for as long as he bears the burdens of governance.

5 — The British fear that Egypt may ask them to implement the law of indemnities, on account of which so much money was squandered in vain. And Sidqi Pasha guarantees them that Egypt will neither mention this law nor think of it, nor demand its implementation.

6 — The British are intent on establishing Port Fouad as a station on the India route, and on connecting it to the British military line in Sinai. And Sidqi Pasha guarantees them the realisation of their wishes in this matter, regardless of the interests and rights Egypt stands to lose.

7 — The British fear that railway and other contracts may be diverted away from London and away from British firms toward others. And Sidqi Pasha guarantees them that these contracts will not be deflected from their course to London and to British hands.

8 — The British are keen that British academic degrees be recognised on a par with Egyptian ones. And Sidqi Pasha delivers to them what they desire in this regard.

9 — The British wish Egypt to lend support to British companies facing bankruptcy or financial difficulty, whether directly or indirectly. And Sidqi Pasha does not deny them this or resist them in it.

10 — The British do not wish Egypt to trouble them with the question of debt, the pegging of Egyptian currency to sterling, and the Bank of England's retention of Egyptian gold reserves. And Sidqi Pasha guarantees them that they will see nothing in this but what pleases them.

11 — The British have convened their Imperial Economic Conference, showed favour to the nations they chose to favour, granted privileges to the peoples they chose to privilege, and paid no heed to Egypt. And Sidqi Pasha guarantees them that Egypt will neither resent this nor protest it.

12 — The British wish Egypt to grant preferential tariff treatment, refraining from levying heavy duties on goods imported from their lands, so that they may prevail in commercial competition. And Sidqi Pasha is committed to delivering them all they desire in this — and more.

What do you make of this dozen charges? Do you not sense, as I do, that the affair between *Al-Ahram* and the Government has passed beyond the pelting of flowers into the hurling of stones? The important thing is not merely that the relationship between *Al-Ahram* and the Government should sour — what matters is that such a souring does not come for nothing and does not pass without consequence; it signifies something, and points to much that lies behind it.

Al-Ahram concludes its observations with a general remark that encapsulates all that has gone before: that the British are intent on making their word a command that admits no dissent, and from which no minister or other official may deviate. They are confident this will be so for as long as Sidqi Pasha remains in power. This means that *Al-Ahram* considers Sidqi Pasha to have entered into an alliance with the British to govern Egypt by their dictates and to serve their interests, even should that expose Egypt's own interests to peril and ruin. It means that Sidqi Pasha's continuation in power is a danger to Egypt's rights and interests.

If you know of an opposition more damaging than this, do tell me. For my part, it seems to me that *Al-Ahram* has thought and calculated, investigated and probed, then — as al-Hajjaj would say — emptied its quiver before it, chose from its arrows the sharpest, the most penetrating, and the most venomous, and loosed them into the breast of its erstwhile friend, the Government.

This morning the Ministry's newspaper was issuing reproaches; tomorrow morning it will be issuing quarrels — unless the wind turns to something more calming and consoling.

So let us wait — let us wait, and do so always with a smile.

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