

A Comic Turn

Not one of the inhabitants of Gharbia Province had any doubt that we possess a powerful, resourceful, and capable government — one that excels at mustering troops, besieging cities, storming dangerous positions, and repelling advancing armies. Gharbia was, on Monday, the theatre of this boundless prowess. What is strange is that the communiqué of congratulation has not yet been issued by the Interior Minister to the troops and police who knew so well how to inscribe for themselves and for their commanders this brilliant and flawless victory.

It is certain that Egyptians may rest easy and sleep soundly henceforth. For it has been established that they possess such defensive strength and such skill in its exercise as will protect them from the aggression of aggressors and the advance of those who would advance upon them. Any state, large or small, that imagines it can covet Egypt, march upon her, or tamper with any of her rights, may be assured that it will be repulsed in that ambition. Hopes will be dashed, desires proved vain, disgrace will overtake such a state, and the times will darken in its face. For Egypt has soldiers and banners, Egypt has strength and vigour, Egypt has commanders who know how to manage advance and retreat, and who have mastered the repelling of the raider, the encirclement of the enemy, and the seizing of his roads.

Egyptians may rest easy and sleep soundly henceforth — and when they sleep they have every right to dream of great affairs and momentous deeds, every right to reclaim their ancient glory and their venerable honour, to see themselves as they were in the days of the Pharaohs and the Fatimids and the Mamluks, or indeed in the days of Muhammad Ali the Great — conquerors and raiders, sovereign masters who sally forth and prevail, who campaign and triumph, their victorious banners fluttering over the farthest reaches of the earth however vast the distances that lie between.

For this splendid and magnificent feat of arms performed by the troops and police the day before yesterday in the city of Tanta and its surroundings, and along the road between it and Zifta, and along the road between it and Masjid Wasif, is worthy of restoring those days, vindicating those dreams, and proving to the modern world what we proved to the ancient world — that our strength is too invincible to be overcome, and our mettle too fierce to be turned back, and that those who desire a tranquil and secure life would do well to esteem us and reckon with us a thousand times over.

How masterly the police were, and how skilled their commanders, when they set out to bar the leader of the Wafd from Tanta — and bar him they did. But how did they bar him? They allowed him to descend from the train and cross the city from one end to the other, while the people around him greeted him with the love and sincere affection they wished to show him — until, whenever the leader passed a group of people and received their love, affection, and salutation, the police descended upon those people and rewarded them for their affection, love, and salutation with the finest and most fitting of rewards, visiting upon them from their truncheons a scorching fire that bespoke hardened hearts and a courage known only to the most exceptional of heroes. And so the leader of the Wafd visited the city of Tanta, met its people and they met him, greeted its people and they greeted him — while the police watched him and them, then visited upon them afterwards the most severe of punishments.

As for what unfolded along the open road — tell of the advance scouts and the successive battalions, of the manoeuvres and the stratagems, of the grovelling and prostration when the leader of the Wafd hove into sight, and then of the arrogance and bluster after he had passed. Until, when the procession reached the city of Zifta, there was to be seen a wonder of wonders and a miracle of miracles. There was the tight siege and the well-executed defence, the display of arms and numbers, the display of force and might, the display of grandeur and majesty. There were the fortifications with which the city was encircled in a full ring: motor cars of every variety arranged in solid ranks, blocking every outlet and passage; deep trenches dug in the earth; monstrous earthen ramparts raised to the sky. The city's streets had been emptied of their inhabitants, the people forced to keep to their homes, all communications between this city and the neighbouring towns and villages cut off. Then photographers were set loose upon these deserted streets and desolate roads, and even the soldiers were removed from sight, and the streets were photographed as they stood — empty of every human soul, free of all movement — so that these photographs might afterwards be presented to those in authority as proof that the leader of the Wafd met no one, and no one met him, in this city. And why not? He had met people in Tanta — that was quite enough for him — and he must not meet them in Zifta. And why not? The police truncheons had already done their work on the bodies of those people whom the leader of the Wafd had "not met" in Zifta. And so the High Command displayed severity and lenience, harshness and compassion, justice and equity — it bore down hard upon the people of Tanta and went gently with the people of Zifta.

The High Command followed the same method again, allowing the people to meet the leader of the Wafd at Masjid Wasif while taking precautions — elaborate precautions — having deployed troops and an armed train and readied police truncheons for their work on human bodies. Until, as the procession drew near Banha, there was the siege and the defence, the seizure of the bridges, and the careful blocking of roads and passageways. And what is strange in this? Is Banha not a fortified position, a stronghold of enormous consequence, into which the enemy ought not to enter or approach — it being sufficient for him to see it, circle around it, and pass by without having gained anything from it?

And so this sorrowful and laughable story was enacted the day before yesterday. The people suffered punishment, and the people witnessed what provokes laughter and brings relief to the soul. And the Interior Minister and his agents in the provinces thus demonstrated that Egypt has an irresistible force, a police that cannot be turned back, and an authority against which there is no recourse. There was but one thing missing from this masterly story — one thing it needed to give proper shape to its chapters and to produce a favourable impression upon the soul — and that was a small measure of shame. What am I saying? It appears that I do not understand the art of theatre, nor know anything of its principles. For had the element of shame entered this story, even in the smallest and most negligible of quantities, a peaceful and tranquil city would not have been subjected to this siege, hundreds of soldiers would not have been unleashed upon it, trenches would not have been dug in its earth, and earthen ramparts would not have been erected around it. Had the element of shame entered this story, no minister could have issued such orders, no governor could have carried them out, no officer or policeman could have worked to execute them — and the spectators of Gharbia would have been deprived of witnessing this magnificent spectacle: the entire Egyptian state declaring in one of its provinces something resembling a state of war, deploying its might and strength, its soldiers and police, to preserve a

security that faced no danger and to maintain an order that faced no disruption — and to ward off two unarmed men paying a visit to an unarmed people, who possessed no weapon whatsoever and harboured no desire for conflict.

Yes — had the element of shame entered this story, the spectators of Gharbia would have been deprived of the performance of this remarkable tale, and the readers of Egypt would have been deprived of reading it and learning of the victories it secured, and East and West alike would have been deprived of grasping the significance of this tale and taking heed of what it demonstrates — that the people of Egypt are still, praise be to God, a young and vigorous force, one that must be feared and reckoned with. Praise be to God who decreed for this story such a triumph — awakening in Egyptians a sense of their own strength, and awakening in the world a sense of Egyptian mettle. And praise be to God who enabled the leader of the Wafd and his companion to learn what they had not known, and to see with their own eyes what they had denied. For it has been proved with conclusive evidence and blazing demonstration that the national spirit in Egypt has died a death from which there is neither return nor resurrection. It has died — no heart beats with it, no pulse throbs with it, no human being feels it.

It has died and become a tale from the tales of history. The proof of this is that the two men passed through one of Egypt's provinces, or two provinces, or several provinces — and no one saw them, and they saw no one — save only those massed troops which the state had dispatched solely to show them some small measure of honour and hospitality. And what is strange in this — that a triumphant victor should condescend to bestow upon a defeated and vanquished adversary some little greeting and a modicum of hospitality? The High Command, in its triumph and victory, merely wished to offer its vanquished adversaries a salutation that, if it signifies anything, signifies refinement and consideration and the fine care shown to the defeated who have laid down their arms.

You ask me then: when will God grant Egypt a share of earnestness, and turn away from her some of this levity in which she has been so thoroughly drowned? Do not be hasty and do not be vexed — for it may be that you dislike a thing and it is good for you, and it may be that you love a thing and it is bad for you. Do not chafe at this levity, for it contains consolation for sorrows and distraction from afflictions. Had Egypt been deprived of this levity, had this banter been taken away from Egypt, she would have been overwhelmed by the pains her people endure, by the sins committed against her, and by the misfortunes heaped upon her. And the consequence of such overwhelming would have been great peril and spreading evil.

Praise be to God who has blessed Egypt with a government like no other — one that wounds with the right hand and dresses the wound with the left; that pours out punishment from one side and lightens its impact with banter from the other; and that makes the lives of Egyptians a tempered blend of earnestness and levity, of severity and gentleness. It takes them by the force of adversity and helps them to bear that adversity — until there comes the day when the waters subside. And perhaps that day is not far off.

Kawkab al-Sharq, 21 June 1933.