

Hopes

Hopes The Prime Minister thought better of things: he exchanged one ship for another, and advanced his return by two days after previously delaying it by half a month. Perhaps the Prime Minister may think better of things yet again, exchanging one vessel for another, advancing his return by a few hours, by a day, by two days, or by several days. It may appear that haste has become imperative; it may appear that necessity presses urgently; it may even appear that, if the Prime Minister's health allowed him to fly on one wing or two or many wings, he would not hesitate to return through the air instead of upon the sea.

Yet people expect no good from this haste, from this eagerness and insistence upon returning so quickly. They do not greet such precipitousness with optimism or cheerful anticipation. They knew their chief minister to be at ease in the European climate, fond of its air and water, fond of the temperate weather that restores vigor and invites recovery. When they learned that he had suddenly grown weary of this climate and disenchanted with it, contrary to all expectation, they sought explanations and searched for causes, yet found nothing in the life of Egypt or the life of the Ministry to justify such urgency.

Some people said that the Prime Minister had long desired to return to Egypt for reasons touching both Egyptian affairs and international affairs alike. The stories of missionary activity and missionaries had disturbed him deeply, and perhaps the policy of the Ministry in this matter had not fully satisfied him. He wished therefore to supervise matters closely himself, so that shelters and refuges might spring from the earth as crops spring from the soil, but without delay or hesitation, and so that certain institutions the Ministry had not yet succeeded in closing might at last be shut down.

It was also said that the Prime Minister had learned that public disorder had increased until it had become troubling and alarming, and that the Ministry's policy for restoring security and calming the public had not entirely pleased him. He therefore wished to oversee this policy personally and from close at hand, so that hearts might rest securely within men's breasts, minds remain steady within their heads, and blood continue to flow through their veins without fear that those veins themselves might burst apart.

It was further said that the Prime Minister had learned of the cloud that had risen from Yemen and spread its shadow over all the Arab lands, its lightning and thunder threatening ruin day and night,

warning people that a savage war might erupt between the two Arab kings and bring grievous calamities upon Muslims everywhere. Thus the Prime Minister preferred to hasten back to Egypt so that the Egyptian government might mediate peace between the two rulers as Haram ibn Sinan once reconciled Abs and Dhubyan, or else arrange for Egypt to maintain a firm, honorable neutrality should mediation and arbitration fail.

And it was said that the Prime Minister had observed the Assyrian crisis in Iraq and the dispute that followed between Iraq and France, and had therefore resolved upon a swift return to Egypt in order to intervene honorably between the disputants and spare them the hardship of appealing to the League of Nations in Geneva.

People spoke in this fashion merely to dispel the fear that had spread among the public because of the Prime Minister's hurried return, and to persuade people that he was coming back bringing only good, only security, and continued tenure in office until the opposition itself should be erased and the Wafd become nothing more than a chapter in history. But the public listened to such talk with one ear and let it pass out the other. They replied that the missionary affair was already old, and public disorder older still; had the Prime Minister truly wished to return for either matter, or for both together, he would long ago have done so.

Nor, they said, had Egypt any she-camel or he-camel in Arabian affairs; nor was the Egyptian government accustomed to intervening between quarrelling nations, Muslim or otherwise. Egypt was confined to its own concerns, occupied with its permanent and passing troubles alike. The Prime Minister was therefore not returning to reconcile Najd and Yemen, nor to mediate between France and Iraq. Rather, he was returning in haste because something had happened that promised no good.

And this event, people said, had not come from the East or from the South, but from England. What event could come from England except the transfer of the High Commissioner from Cairo to Ankara? Thus people insisted that the Prime Minister's return was connected to the transfer of the High Commissioner, and they would not be persuaded otherwise.

It appears that the Ministry—or at least those circles surrounding it—had sensed the people's fear and sought to reassure both the public and themselves. Thus reassuring birds began to fly through the Egyptian sky, carrying messages of calm and security. One evening paper reported that the High Commissioner had indeed been transferred, but not entirely or definitively; he would go to Ankara only after passing through Egypt and remaining there for several months, continuing meanwhile to

exercise all his authority exactly as before.

Thus the High Commissioner was transferred yet stationary, departing yet remaining, accredited to Turkey yet still imposed upon Egypt. The meaning of all this was that the Ministry still possessed time and room to live on. It would not suddenly abandon the people, nor vanish from among them as the leader of the Wafd had vanished from Upper Egypt aboard a speeding train. Rather, it would take its leave slowly and ceremoniously, exchanging gifts and courtesies that would preserve memory and affection alike.

And who knows? Perhaps during those months in which the transferred yet stationary Commissioner remained among us, the negotiations that everyone expects would take place, and the treaty that everyone foresees would be concluded. Then the two friends—the Prime Minister and the British Commissioner—would part after accomplishing together, at the close of their political lives, what they had failed to accomplish in earlier days when fortune smiled upon them and the resources of power and authority stretched before them without limit.

Another morning paper, which we believe to have been *Al-Ahram*, reported today that the Prime Minister suffered from no illness and contemplated no resignation. He had remained constantly in touch with the Ministry in Egypt, managing affairs from afar, but now longed to draw nearer to it—within “two bow-lengths or even nearer.” Thus he had hastened his return, determined to continue steadfastly upon his course after returning, without veering right to rest or left to resign. Nor did it matter to him whether one Commissioner departed and another arrived; all commissioners were alike in his eyes.

Another paper, which we believe to have been *Al-Sha'b*, published something still more significant and reassuring. It claimed to have spoken with a minister—indeed with the minister most qualified to speak on such matters: the new Foreign Minister. Both *Al-Sha'b* and *Al-Ittihad* questioned him and discovered that he knew no more about the transfer of the High Commissioner than they themselves knew, or than any newspaper reader knew.

This conversation spread reassurance through Egyptian political circles more effectively than anything else. For how could people fail to feel secure regarding the Ministry's stability if the transfer of the High Commissioner was truly such an ordinary and insignificant matter? The ministers knew of it only as newspaper readers did. Had the matter possessed any importance whatsoever, the Ministry would surely have been consulted beforehand—or at least informed afterward.

Even more reassuring was the answer given by the Foreign Minister when asked whether reports in some English newspapers were true: namely, that the transfer of the High Commissioner did not indicate any change in British policy toward Egypt. The minister answered with that curious response peculiar to foreign ministers, a reply full of confidence, reassurance, and serenity alike. He said: "And why should it not be true?"

The minister's answer was itself a question, and in truth *Al-Sha'b* and *Al-Ittihad* ought to have answered it. Yet neither did so, because the knowledge required to answer such a question belonged neither to them, nor to the Foreign Minister, nor even to the English newspapers. It belonged rather to others who had not yet spoken plainly, though perhaps they would do so after the Prime Minister returned.

In any case, these birds of reassurance continued to circle through the Egyptian atmosphere, calming fears and filling hearts with tranquility. Most likely more such birds will soon follow them. And after a few days one will hear nothing but the cry resounding across Egypt that the Ministry had never in all its history been stronger than it was now.

Thus the old poet spoke truly:

How narrow life would be were it not for the spaciousness of hope.

And the ancient poetess too spoke truly:

*Were it not for the many mourners around me,
weeping for their brothers,
I would have killed myself.*

*They do not weep for one like my brother,
yet I console myself through endurance.*

*The rising sun reminds me of Sakhr,
and I remember him at every sunset.*

All we ask is that the Egyptian sky remain, for a few days at least, clear for these birds of hope, and that no other birds appear—birds sent by the English newspapers or the British Foreign

Office—foretelling despair, summoning hopelessness, and warning loyal supporters and allies to save themselves while they still can.