

Shame

Kawkab al-Sharq, 15 May 1933

And why should the Cabinet not feel shame, when its members are human beings like other human beings — who feel and sense things, who are pleased and displeased, who find pain painful when it becomes severe, and who fear ill repute when it passes all reasonable bounds?

The Cabinet has taken stances on the question of economy that are, to put it at its mildest, laughable — stances that no person can look upon with any seriousness, or consider in the way one considers stances that bear examination and criticism, and are fit to be thought about and weighed.

Scarcely had it grown old enough to know better than it filled the world with clamour that the state treasury was in danger, that economy — indeed, strict austerity — was unavoidable and inescapable, and that civil servants were called upon to heed the voice of duty, to answer the call of the homeland, and to forgo their right to increments and promotions, so that the treasury should not be emptied, the state should not be incapacitated, and Egypt should not be exposed to bankruptcy. The civil servants chafed at this language, but they believed it, they settled into accepting it, they answered the call of duty, and they renounced their increments and their promotions. But no sooner had the state's need for economy grown more acute, and its funds become threatened with exhaustion, than another sacrifice was demanded of the civil servants, and another appeal was made to national feeling and patriotic duty, and to sparing Egypt from incapacity and bankruptcy; their salaries were cut, and they chafed at the cuts, but accepted them, answering the call of duty. Then it appeared that what had been cut from their salaries was too little, and further sacrifices were demanded of them; the duty to the homeland was held before them in images that filled hearts with tenderness for the nation, and compassion for it, and sympathy with it, and so they gave up yet another portion of their salaries; and they had already braced themselves for further sacrifices to be demanded of them, and further burdens to be imposed upon them. But then they looked, and saw — and what a sight it was! They saw that promotions and increments had been barred to them across the board; but then the door of exceptions began to open, little by little, and promotions and increments began to pass through it to a group of favorites and intimates, of clients and protégés; and they felt the pain,

and fell silent — some too ashamed to speak, keeping their silence, others too cautious, averting their gaze and looking away. And the door of exceptions opened wider, and more increments and promotions passed through it, and the civil servants' pain grew sharper, and their resentment more bitter; some muttered, some grumbled, and some felt no scruple in speaking plainly and protesting openly. Then the civil servants looked again, and saw — and what a sight it was! They saw that the Cabinet had reduced all their salaries, but had then gone back and circled around some of those reduced salaries until it had restored them to what they had been, or added something to them.

It had done this with a group of foreigners whose legations had protested the reduction of their salaries by the stamp duty; the Cabinet claimed there was no escaping the foreigners' acceptance of this duty, but it raised their salaries by the amount of the reduction or more, giving with the right hand and taking with the left. And it had done the same with some favorites and intimates, some clients and protégés, for whom it discovered rare achievements and brilliant competencies; it rewarded them for those achievements with money, and for those competencies with promotions, and kept on until it had given them, in place of the reduction, an increase, and in place of the loss, a gain — until others wished their salaries had been cut many times over, if only achievements could then be discovered for them to be rewarded with money, and competencies to be priced in promotions. At this, some of the civil servants muttered, others grumbled, and those most inflamed chose plain speaking over hints; the offices of the departments and ministries, and the atmospheres of the clubs and coffee-houses, filled with the despair of the despairing, the greed of the greedy, the resentment of the resentful, and the scheming of the scheming; and the atmosphere of the government became an atmosphere of intrigue and cunning, of reproach and grievance, of despair and resentment: this one complaining, that one hoping, another scoffing, another consigning his fate to God. Every man thinking about his salary: will it fall, will it rise, or will it stay where it is? Every man thinking about his grade; every man thinking about his colleagues who had left school with him, or after him, and then outstripped him by a distance he could never hope to close.

Every man thinking about all this, every man talking about all this, every man preoccupied with all this in his office, his club, his coffee-house — and then going home to show his family a darkened face, a furrowed brow, and a sour temper. Not talking to his wife about the

children's affairs, or about the serious and lighthearted things of life, or about the pleasures and pains of home — but talking to her about how so-and-so has been promoted, and so-and-so has got a raise, while he is still where he was, with no promotion and no raise to his name; and about how he has written a memorandum in which he complains and protests, or pleads and entreats, or defends his rights and stakes his claim — and his memorandum was filed away and ignored, and his superiors have taken to looking at him askance, and greeting him with a yellow smile full of pity and contempt.

And his family listens to all this and despairs and grows miserable, then grieves and commiserates, then does its best to console and distract him but gets nowhere near what it hopes to accomplish. And they are all plunged into a deep grief and a dense resentment, and they are all, like him, fuming and calling down God's wrath upon the unjust; and the small children of the house are playing and larking about, then notice their parents and come toward them with sweet, smiling faces, only to find nothing but dark, bitter faces looking back at them, and they go away again, the ember of joy and play extinguished in their young souls, and they turn to one another and wonder: why has sadness changed our father's face, and why has our mother wet her cheek with tears?

There is no exaggeration in what I have said, no excess; and I swear that junior civil servants know every word of it, and I swear they confirm every word of it, and I swear their families corroborate every word of it, not denying a letter of it nor changing a thing; and I swear that their daughters and sons are, on many an occasion, afraid to come to them or go to them, fearing to find in their faces the sorrow and grief that they cannot bear to see.

And yet these civil servants are the best-off of Egyptians, the most wide in hope among Egyptians, the most confident in their tomorrow among Egyptians, and the most secure from thirst and hunger.

And so the Cabinet went on, extending its hand to one group of civil servants and closing it against another, until mistrust reached its furthest extent among colleagues, and between subordinates and superiors; a rivalry that breeds mistrust, an injustice that breeds mistrust, an iniquity that breeds mistrust; and the duties of the state all the while going astray and abandoned — some discharged with listlessness and reluctance, others neglected in resentment and contempt.

Until last Thursday came, and the Council of Ministers assembled in the evening; and a batch of promotions and increments was put before it, every one of them an exception, swollen with excess and extravagance in that excess. Some of the ministers muttered, the press reports, and others grumbled — and they were not without excuse, for every one of them needed the exceptions, every one of them had made promises and been extravagant in those promises, and every one of them had been hearing the complaints of the complaining and the supplications of the supplicating: so why should some people win and others lose?! And so it was that the Council of Ministers ended by choosing candour over evasion, and flung the door of promotion and increment wide open, authorizing the ministries and departments to submit to it the names of capable persons who deserved a promotion or an increment, for it to examine their cases and reward them for their patience. But these promotions and increments that were approved last Thursday are many and outrageous, full of favouritism and manœuvring, of preference for some over others; and if they become known, they will stir every last ounce of the civil servants' latent resentment; and if they become known, they will open doors onto the Cabinet that ought to stay closed until the wronged have been given justice and the aggrieved have been appeased; and if they become known, they will make the Cabinet a byword in the mouths of the Opposition for the laughable, erratic conduct that proceeds from no considered thinking or sound judgement, and from no preference of the public good over the satisfaction of favorites and intimates, and the accommodation of interests and desires. And the ministers are human beings like other human beings — they feel embarrassment, they know shame — and so the Thursday decisions must be kept secret, preserved as a guarded confidence behind drawn veils through which no eye may penetrate, until the storm has subsided, and the commotion has settled, and more promotions and increments appear so that these exceptions may be drowned out and pass without the public noticing them!

And so the Cabinet has found for itself a way out of this predicament — but it can be quite sure that this way out will not get it out of anything. Its secrets are known however it conceals them, and its hidden affairs are exposed however it covers them; and nothing will get it out of this predicament except two things, the sweeter of which is bitter: either it cancels the exceptions it has approved, or it drowns the civil servants in a flood of increments and promotions, at which point the people will laugh at the legend of economy, just as they laughed before at a great many other legends of this Cabinet...!!

Well now: is the Cabinet's record not worthy of stirring in the bosoms of its ministers the emotion of shame?.