

Prime Minister

They were told, "Come," and they came swiftly. Had they been told, "Go back," they would have gone back just as swiftly. Some among them, if told "Work," are filled with energy and zeal for labor. Others, if told "Be idle," become devoted to laziness and cling to it eagerly. But among them there was one man who insisted upon distinguishing himself from the rest, for the invitation sent to him was evidently neither vague nor obscure. It was perfectly clear in its purpose: he was being summoned not as ordinary men are summoned, but for a great task. So he prepared himself for this great undertaking, gathered his strength for it, and refused to proceed without first sending ahead of him from Paris a herald flying toward Egypt on the wings of lightning. They say that he spoke to a journalist at one of the Paris railway stations, declaring his political views and his philosophy of government. This great man approaching a great task was His Excellency Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha, whom many people already agreed circumstances intended to make the head of the "coming Ministry." Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha had been settled in France enjoying life and its pleasures—pleasures denied these days to many Egyptians because of the monstrous crisis imposed upon them by the monstrous policy of Sidqi Pasha and his associates, among whom Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha himself had once stood. He is a man to whom God has granted every comfort of life and abundance of wealth. He lives luxuriously in Egypt and luxuriously in Europe. When he served as minister under Sidqi Pasha, he found it necessary to travel through Europe, to change the climate and the air, and to travel at the expense of the Egyptian state in order to visit diplomatic missions and inspect the work of Egypt's representatives abroad. Then, once Sidqi Pasha removed him from the Ministry, he again found it necessary to travel—this time at his own expense rather than Egypt's. And there he was, enjoying that journey, when suddenly the summons reached him: "Come, for politics has need of you." So he came rushing back. God knows, and politics knows as well: did he return at his own expense or at Egypt's? Both possibilities admit a reasonable interpretation. If he returned at his own expense, then he is merely an ordinary man blessed with wealth who traveled abroad and then found himself obliged to return, spending what was necessary even though he hurried home before completing his journey. But if he returned at Egypt's expense, then he is truly one of the great men of state, disturbed from his comfort by the nation itself, interrupted in his pleasures because the state required him for a great matter. Perhaps the shipping companies were even persuaded to delay the departure of a vessel for his sake. In that case, surely it would be only right for the ■■■■■■ to pay the costs of his return. For the state needs him; he does not need the state. Proof of this is that he had gone abroad in the first place. Had he needed the state, he would have remained. Proof also is that he was summoned back. Had the state not needed him, it would have left him where he was. Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha, therefore, is a great man: he turns away from politics, and politics pursues him; he avoids power, and power chases after him; he flees authority, and

authority throws itself upon him. He is also a man of luxury who spends his summers not in Egypt like those suffering under crisis, but in Europe like ministers, notables, and senior officials. One imagines that he did not travel to Europe to study the conditions of Egyptians or to observe their misery, deprivation, poverty, hunger, bankruptcy, and despair. Rather, he traveled there to escape hearing about such things and to enjoy sights and sounds more agreeable to the soul. Had there been anything rational in Egypt during these days, the reasonable course—once he had been summoned back and learned why he had been summoned—would have been for him to think deeply and long, to maintain silence, and to wait until the nature of this “great task” became fully clear. He should have examined whether he possessed the strength to carry such burdens or whether they exceeded his capacity. He should have reflected on why his former chief had resigned and why he himself was now expected to succeed him and settle—or perhaps liquidate—his political inheritance. He should have sought to understand the opinion of the Egyptians he was being called to govern: were they encouraging him to take office, or warning him against it? He should also have learned who the men were with whom he would be expected to work: were they suited to his temperament, character, and philosophy of government, or opposed to them? All this would have been rational—if Egypt’s affairs were governed rationally these days. But Egypt’s affairs are now diseased. They move as illness permits them to move: some drift north when they should move south, some rise when they should descend, and some descend when they should rise. And since Egyptian politics itself has become so diseased, it is no wonder that politicians themselves should behave irrationally. Thus the future Prime Minister saw in this summons only one thing: that he was being called to rule. And how could a man hesitate when invited to rule? Why would he demand conditions, seek clarification, or establish principles before accepting? He was invited to govern—and another man might easily have been invited instead. Even now another might still be invited in his place. So either he must seize the opportunity firmly and secure it for himself, or else the golden bird with its splendid feathers—the bird called “opportunity”—would escape him and land instead upon another ambitious seeker of office. Indeed, before him the President of the Senate had already been invited and had hurried forward hopefully. Another senator, according to rumor, had likewise come eagerly in expectation. And throughout Egypt many others, though never invited at all, had nevertheless imagined themselves summoned. Some even interrupted their travels and hurried home because of these fantasies. But our future Prime Minister is too intelligent and too prudent to allow such a splendid golden bird to escape once he has grasped it in one hand—or even in both hands. It is therefore natural that he should tighten his grip upon this bird and secure himself firmly in power. The method is simple and clear: a statement delivered to the offices of Al-Ahram before boarding the train. In this statement he pledges his love for the “new order” which he himself helped establish and impose, declaring his determination to defend and strengthen it and insisting that all good lies within it alone. In this statement there is also a warning to Egyptians: the night of Sidqi Pasha has not given way

to a radiant dawn but merely to another night equally dark. Whoever allowed himself to hope that he would awaken free beneath a brighter sun deceived himself and nourished false dreams. Sidqi Pasha has departed, and Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha has come. Both love the same policy under which Egypt has suffered for years. Both are equally devoted to preserving it. One man was prevented from continuing to impose it because he failed and exhausted himself in the attempt. His companion now arrives determined to complete what the other began and to achieve what the first could not accomplish. Yes, within this statement lies a silencing of rivals, a challenge to opponents, a declaration of political war, and the foundation of the coming Ministry itself. Whoever wishes may approve, and whoever wishes may grow angry. The future Prime Minister himself is content, hopeful, and confident. And thus Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha approaches Egypt extending a hand like the hand of Sidqi Pasha—except stronger, more forceful, and more capable of action—and raising before Egyptians a whip like the whip of Sidqi Pasha, except more capable of tearing bodies apart should tearing become necessary. Thus one night follows another, and the political crisis remains as it was before Sidqi Pasha resigned: deeply complicated and profoundly dark. Yet Egyptians still rejoice, because the night that has passed was so long and oppressive that no future night, not even one cast by Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha himself, can equal its weight. Events themselves are rapidly proving that Egyptians were inspired in rejoicing at the fall of Sidqi Pasha and his associates—though wisely without excess or intoxication. For one tyrannical Ministry has fallen, and another may now seek to become tyrannical in its place. Egyptians ought not truly rejoice until tyranny itself disappears entirely and its burden is lifted from them forever. They have already learned how to stand firm against Sidqi Pasha and force him toward failure and bankruptcy. And they know equally well how to stand firm against Sidqi Pasha's successor and force him likewise toward failure and bankruptcy. They know perfectly well that they can expect nothing from Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha that they did not fail to receive from Sidqi Pasha himself. The crisis will not be resolved for them, suffering will not be lifted, liberty will not be restored, and they will not feel honored in their own land. Instead the same miserable condition will continue throughout the days of the new Prime Minister just as it continued throughout the days of the old, until God permits it to disappear. And already signs of that great permission have begun to appear clearly and powerfully. The High Commissioner would never have been transferred, nor Sidqi Pasha confined to his home, except because of events of tremendous significance. Egyptians know perfectly well that this visible political crisis disturbing the surface of the lake is not itself the true danger. It is merely the prelude to something far greater. They therefore watch this visible crisis mockingly, turning it into amusement and entertainment as they talk and gather together. And why should they not laugh when this resigning "Prime Minister" submits his resignation while simultaneously announcing its acceptance, while his ministers continue their work pretending ignorance of everything? Why should they not laugh when the same resigning "Prime Minister" imagines himself one hour the leader of a parliamentary majority,

thundering and roaring, demanding consultation and authority, only to glimpse a smile baring sharp teeth in the political sky and immediately withdraw every word he had spoken? And why should they not laugh when the future Prime Minister reveals eagerness and longing for power without demanding a single condition, while willingly surrendering every condition upon himself? And why should they not laugh when the coming Ministry is already being assembled, offices distributed, and portfolios assigned while its future head still drifts between sky and sea admiring the stars and their reflections upon the waves? The royal consultation for forming the Ministry had not even yet begun. Everything in these days is strange except one thing alone: Egyptians are not deceived by any of it. They do not take it seriously. Instead they smile, joke, and wait.