

A Prisoner

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That Egypt is a part of Europe, as the Khedive Ismail said, in the phrase people still repeat, is a thing beyond all possible doubt. For Egypt has steam and electricity, Egypt has the telegraph and the telephone, Egypt has the Opera, and all the acting, dancing, and singing that go on within it. Between Egypt and Europe run roads of land, sea, and air, cut across by ships, trains, and airplanes in short hours and long. Egypt has ministries headed by ministers, Egypt has a Chamber of Deputies, and a Senate. Egypt has primary schools and preparatory schools besides, and it has secondary schools, and private higher institutes besides, and it has a university too. Egypt has theaters and playing-fields, and it has clubs and coffee-houses. And beyond all this, and before all this, and above all this and beneath all this, it has a roving press, some of it appearing in the morning, some in the evening, some when the sun stands at its zenith in the sky. And weekly papers, and monthly ones besides — all of them roam, all of them roar, all of them criticize and criticize well, all of them praise and praise handsomely, all of them support and all of them oppose. Egypt has all this, and more than all this — so there can be no doubting, then, that Egypt is a part of Europe.

But it is a material part of a material Europe, an outward part of an outward Europe, a luxurious part of a luxurious Europe. As for whether Egypt is a civilized part of a civilized Europe, or a cultured part of a cultured Europe, or a part refined in mind and character, in sense and sensibility, and in every aspect of breeding, of a Europe refined in mind and character, sense and sensibility, and in every aspect of breeding — that is a thing not yet proven; indeed, it remains open to doubt. And it appears it shall remain open to doubt for a long time yet. It is as though the Khedive Ismail, when he uttered this phrase of his, was painting his own ideal rather than depicting the reality as it stood. But half a century separates us from Ismail's era, and it would have been well had something of this ideal which Ismail once painted come to pass, so that Egypt might become a civilized part of a cultured Europe, a refined part of a refined Europe. This is what ought to have happened; but what ought to be is one thing, and what is is quite another. The truth, beyond all doubt, is that this ideal remains as far as ever from being realized. And civilized Egypt, in her material life, remains very far indeed from

civilization in her moral life. And the proof of this is that those the judiciary has sentenced to prison for a crime of opinion continue to be treated in their captivity exactly as the wretches sentenced for crimes of theft and highway robbery are treated.

They are confined in a narrow cell exposed to a lethal air, not a life-giving one. They sleep upon the ground, with nothing between them and the ground but a pillow of straw. They drink from a mug; they have no light by night, and scarcely take exercise by day. They labor as other criminals labor, and live as other criminals live. All their intellectual faculties are suspended: they neither read nor write, as though their minds were being punished for having thought, and so denied the very means of thought; as though their talents were being punished for having produced, and so denied the very grounds of production. For all this they are exposed to weakness, then to hardship, then to grievous illness and unrelenting pain. And despite all this, they carry no weight with anyone, and rarely does even the smallest measure of a doctor's care reach them. There are, it is true, doctors in the prison, and the prison does have infirmaries; but the doctor visits the sick man only once his illness has brought him to the most fearful stage, and the sick man is not moved to the prison infirmary except when there is no other choice left. And you can understand and appreciate this well enough, in the language of prisons.

This is the condition of those punished in Egypt for crimes of opinion. As for those punished in Europe for crimes of theft and highway robbery, they sleep on beds; they take exercise; they are given treatment they might never attain in their lives outside prison. And they read newspapers produced for them in some countries.

As for those punished for crimes of opinion in Europe, they read, and think, and produce, and are shown, in their material life, all the care that a well-to-do man of the middle classes might need. For Europe has come to understand imprisonment not as torment, but as a means of restraining the criminal from continuing in his crime, for a longer or a shorter time.

But here, prison is torment; prison is vengeance; prison is a form of exacting retribution; prison is an art of chastisement which no one minds seeing tinged, from time to time, with violence.

After all this, can we still say that Egypt is a refined part of a refined Europe? No — there is no way to such a claim. Those who fault European

civilization and hold it in contempt would do well to think, and think at length, before falling into this fault and this contempt. For Egypt has, until now, known nothing of European civilization but its vices and its sins on the one hand, and its outward forms and appearances on the other. As for its true goods and benefits, as for its realities and its essence, Egypt's ignorance of these comes close to being complete.

Here is our friend Tawfiq Diab, imprisoned for a crime of opinion which the law punishes today, and may well reward tomorrow; yet he is treated in his captivity, as you have seen, exactly as other criminals are treated — with no regard for his learning, nor for his mind, nor for his standing, nor for his frailty and his illness. He has simply been thrust into this workshop of torment which they call a prison, and must bear, within this workshop, whatever measure of torment has been prepared for him.

And the most beautiful and most exquisite thing in this affair, the finest and most splendid thing in it, is that our friend Tawfiq Diab is a member of a family called the family of the press. And this press family considers itself possessed of a power of the gravest consequence, grants itself the right to lead public opinion, to refine minds and morals, and to elevate sense and sensibility. It considers itself the leader of the entire Arab East, and does not scruple to invite European journalists to hold their congress in Egypt, nor scruple to regard itself as a manifestation of Egyptian progress, and a proof that Egypt has indeed become a part of Europe!! And then, after all this, it accepts that one of its own members should be treated in prison as thieves and highwaymen are treated.

It will be said that it has not accepted this: that it has met and met again, made speeches and written articles, spoken at length, petitioned and pleaded. But for all that, it accepts that a member of its own should be treated in prison as thieves and highwaymen are treated! For meeting, making speeches, writing, petitioning, and pleading are all the very least the press ought to do in defense of its dignity and in the struggle for its rights. None of it costs the press anything. And what hardship is there in colleagues gathering, in speakers making speeches to be applauded, in writers writing to be praised? In petitioners petitioning and being ignored? In pleaders pleading and receiving no answer? There is no hardship in that, and no cost. Perhaps there is even pleasure in it — and perhaps a little vanity too. For who could deny that journalists find pleasure when they praise one another, and applaud one another? And who could deny that journalists have profited handsomely from the affair of Mr. Diab, establishing for themselves a club they now frequent, where

they while away their evenings — and this club had scarcely come into being before certain gifts began arriving for it!

All this took place; and yet Mr. Tawfiq Diab continued to be treated in his captivity exactly as ordinary criminals are treated, until he fell ill — God forgive us — until illness overtook him again, wearing him down and pressing hard upon him.

And the journalists learned of this, and were sorry, and protested, and hoped — trusting that not one among them would go beyond sorrow, protest, and hope. None of that demands hardship, none of it imposes sacrifice, none of it exacts a cost. And so long as the matter is words, or something resembling words, we are capable of it, indeed we are eager for it. But should you ask the press to take some action that would make the government and the people feel it was truly angry, truly suffering — should you ask the press to suspend publication for a day, or for days — that would be, on your part, excess and extravagance, and would meet from the press with nothing but aversion and a turning-away. And yet this is the very least the press ought to have done, had it truly valued solidarity.

Our friend Diab must bear his pains alone, for his brethren love themselves too well to share these pains with him! But those who will be happy today and tomorrow, on the feast of Easter and the Sham el-Nessim holiday, ought to know; those who will come and go exchanging greetings and congratulations, ought to know; those who will taste tomorrow the blessing of a freedom as vast as Egypt herself, as unconfined as the open air, as sweet as the spring breeze, ought to know that there is, in prison, an Egyptian condemned for a crime of opinion, who submitted, as he was bound to, to the judiciary's ruling — but who lies stretched upon a pillow of straw, with no barrier between it and the bare ground, worn down by exhausting pains and wasted by a merciless affliction. And not one among those with the power to help him and ease his lot has thought to spare him from being made a prisoner like any other of those imprisoned for crimes of opinion.

Those who will breathe the spring breeze tomorrow ought to consider that our friend Tawfiq Diab has already accepted not to breathe that breeze; but that it is his right, at the very least, to be content with that resignation alone, and not to have to taste, along with this deprivation, the bitterness of pain and torment as well.