

A Mistake

Kawkab al-Sharq, 18 March 1933

It appears that distance from home affects people's perception of things and their judgement of them, even when they are among the most knowledgeable about those things and the most penetrating in their understanding of their inner workings — just as the distance of the sense organs from sensory objects weakens the senses' apprehension of things.

Our friend Maḥmūd 'Azmī is among the most knowledgeable of people about Egypt, about the events that occur there, and about the people who are agitated by them. He is likewise genuinely expert in the nature of life and of living people in this country; but his acquaintance with his homeland is distant, and his home is far removed from it. He perceives things from afar, and expects more from people than he would expect if his acquaintance with them were recent, if he were living among them, seeing them every day, speaking with them every day, observing the effect of events on their souls, hearing their tongues express the impact of those events, and hearing the agitation in their voices at what their souls find of pleasure and pain, of ease and misery, of joy and sorrow. He would feel, through all of this, what hidden consciences conceal of rage and resentment, of hope and despair. He would then expect from people other than what he expects from them now, and demand from the nature of things other than what he demands of it now.

For I smiled — as I smile today, a smile full of nothing but bitterness and deep sorrow — when I saw him expecting that the newspapers loyal to the cabinet would be more insistent than the opposition newspapers in pressing the government to change the prison regime as it applies to crimes of opinion, and in hastening to improve the condition of our friend Tawfīq Diyāb in his prison.

I smiled a smile full of nothing but bitterness and deep sorrow; for I knew that 'Azmī is far from Egypt: he does not see its people, nor see how they are affected by what has occurred in the way of events, nor their comprehension of those events, nor their judgement of them. Yet he is, for all that, deeply sensitive — as he always has been — loving the highest ideals of cooperation and solidarity, aspiring to the good, and

bearing responsibilities in its pursuit. He expects from the newspapers loyal to the cabinet what people expect from the newspapers loyal to governments in Europe: that they recall, above all else, that they are newspapers, and that newspapers were created to call for the good and to press for it insistently — and that they therefore hasten to press the government urgently to honour the dignity of opinion, and to treat Tawfīq Diyāb as his counterparts are treated in countries that honour liberty and the dignity of the intellect.

He expects, further, that the newspapers loyal to the cabinet will not hesitate to profit from their loyalty to the cabinet so as to exploit their closeness to the government and direct it towards the good, making it a means of achieving the justice, righteousness, and equity about which there is no disagreement among people — whether they are among the government's supporters or among its opponents and adversaries.

He expects all of this, and he has every right to expect all of this; for the nature of things, if it were upright and proceeded along a moderate course of love of truth and goodness, would require the newspapers loyal to the government to take the stance towards Tawfīq Diyāb and towards this prison regime that our friend 'Azmī expects of them. But the nature of things has twisted in Egypt, and the course along which it proceeds has become corrupt and crooked. The cabinet's newspapers cannot be quicker than the opposition newspapers in demanding a change of the prison regime and the reform of Tawfīq Diyāb's situation — because before they think of the good for its own sake they are compelled to think about what is possible and what is not possible, about what is wanted and what is not wanted, and then about what can be said and what cannot be said.

They are compelled to this; it is not easy for them to speak truth plainly to the government, or to press the government on matters it dislikes. Had they done so, they would have found no favour from the government, faces they wish to see turned towards them would have turned away, and persons they like to have greet them with warmth and congeniality would have grown scarce.

They are therefore compelled to satisfy the government before they satisfy themselves, and before they satisfy the ideal of journalism. Are they to be blamed for this or excused? Those of upright character who want only virtue and virtue alone will blame them, because truth and goodness must come before everything — even before the government's satisfaction with the opposition newspapers. As for the pragmatists, those who wish to reconcile self-interest and character within these social conventions that we call tact, they excuse them, and content themselves with asking that the government's newspapers choose a middle ground for themselves — showing consideration for the opposition newspapers while being gentle with the government, not pressing it with importunate and relentless demands.

And you have perhaps not forgotten that a minister serving today was a journalist yesterday — one who found it distasteful to join the journalists in their demands, and felt no scruple about declaring this openly and publicly; for he prefers the passions of parties to the good for its own sake, to truth for its own sake, and to that justice which rises above party conflict just as it rises above all particular interests.

Had 'Azmī been present, witnessing these people as they gathered and argued, he would have known that he goes too far when he asks more of people than they are capable of. Yes — the real self-interest of the government's newspapers demands that they expend all the strength and effort at their disposal to reform the prison regime and to bring comfort to Tawfīq Diyāb, because they are today loyal to the government, enjoying its favour, and secure from its force. But it is shortsighted to believe that this cabinet will endure forever; this cabinet will undoubtedly pass, the affairs of government will pass into the hands of the opposition, and the present cabinet's newspapers will become opposition newspapers — and who knows, perhaps they will stray from the law, perhaps they will be compelled to face prison.

Is it not wise to prepare for themselves from this moment a decent prison that will not torment them if they are compelled to enter it? Yet you can persuade the government's newspapers of anything except that their cabinet will pass, and that they may be exposed to what the

newspapers opposing the government are exposed to today.

And 'Azmi's error in perceiving and judging things does not stop there; for he mentions that the prison administration in England takes notice of a newspaper for criminals — as though he hopes that the lives of political prisoners in Egypt's prisons might approach their lives in the prisons of other countries. Had 'Azmi been in Egypt, seen the ministers and their conduct, listened to their conversations and to what people say about them, and seen the courage and lion-heartedness of the deputies towards the opposition newspapers when certain offences occur, then their listlessness and failure of nerve when they are asked to reform the prison regime, he would have known that the ancient poet did not err when he said:

He who demands of days what contradicts their nature

is one who seeks a burning ember in the water.

No, my friend — the cabinet's newspapers did not hasten, and will not hasten, towards that good you wished they would hasten towards; nor did the government and Parliament manifest the desire for a prison reform regime and relief for those imprisoned for their opinions that you wished they would manifest. In all probability the matter will remain as it is now until God replaces one set of parties with another, and until God makes one people succeed another in governing this nation — people who do not make government a means to domination and repression, who do not see prison as a method of revenge, who do not discriminate in their treatment between supporters and opponents, who do not proclaim without scruple or caution that Egypt has attained the same level of progress and civilisation as other advanced and civilised states — and then, in the very same breath, see fit to apply to Egyptians, and to Egyptians alone, methods that are as far as they could possibly be from the methods of enlightened and civilised governance.

Yes — in all probability Tawfiq Diyāb will endure what he endures in his prison with patience, as I have known him; with fortitude, as I have known him; smiling at adversity, as I have known him — until God changes one condition into another and makes one people succeed

another. And if you cannot help but hope and pray and await the good, then place your hope and your prayer in God and in the nation; for it is to them alone that hope and prayer belong, and from them alone that good is to be expected.