

Birds

Kawkab al-Sharq, 2 May 1933

In Egypt's atmosphere at this moment there are birds that soar for a while, then alight, then flit back and forth between the offices of ministers and the premises of certain newspapers, and drop in on gatherings of people in Cairo and the provinces. These birds are not beautiful in form, nor pleasing to the eye; they are not light in their movements, nor graceful in their soaring and landing. They are ugly, repulsive, and frightening — heavy in shadow, with broad wings. They are not sweet of voice, nor pleasant in their song, nor do they serenade people with the melody of nightingales; they are hideous of voice, jarring in their note, and screech like owls. Their names are not names that invite optimism, the expectation of good, or a smile of hope; they are names that invite pessimism, the anticipation of evil, and the remembrance of despair. Some of them are called Lying; some are called the Disclosure of Secrets; and some are called Suspicion. These birds are turbulent in all of Egypt's atmosphere, corrupting it most thoroughly. They beat their wings in a violent flapping that nearly deafens the ear. From time to time they let out raucous shrieks that terrify the soul. They spread a foul odour through the air that offends the senses. And they are about to lead the Egyptians, if they are not driven from their atmosphere, into great evil!

A newspaper reported to its readers on Tuesday that the Prime Minister had spoken by telephone to Egypt's Plenipotentiary Minister in London, and the Prime Minister said nothing in response to this report. The next day, another newspaper reported that our Plenipotentiary Minister in London had informed its correspondent that a telephone conversation had in fact taken place between himself and the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister remained silent on this report for several days, while the newspapers took up the report with interpretation and commentary — the Prime Minister silent and not speaking, still and not moving, listless and not displaying the slightest activity — until last evening, when the Prime Minister claimed to al-Muqattam that the

telephone conversation had not taken place. Where then does the truth lie? And where the falsehood? From whom do we seek honesty? And upon whom do we lay the responsibility for the lie?

Al-Muqaṭṭam claimed that a responsible party in Egypt had spoken by telephone to Egypt's Minister in London; al-Balāgh claimed that Egypt's Plenipotentiary Minister in London had informed its correspondent that this conversation had taken place; and the Prime Minister claimed, days later, that this conversation had not taken place. There is, then, an ugly bird of hideous appearance and grating voice, flitting between the offices of al-Muqaṭṭam, the offices of al-Balāgh, the Egyptian Legation in London, and the Prime Minister's office. This bird's name is too ugly to denote honesty, counsel, or love of truth. It does not know where among these places it will alight; it will find neither peace nor rest until it finds a settled perch to settle on and a nest to retreat to. And it will corrupt the atmosphere with its raucous shrieks and its noxious odour until it is driven from the atmosphere and returned to its nest, far from ears, eyes, and noses!

Another newspaper claimed the day before yesterday that the Prime Minister spoke to his colleagues at their Thursday meeting with political intelligence that had reached him from this bewildering telephone conversation, some of which concerned the High Commissioner and some of which concerned the Anglo-Egyptian Committee — all of it revolving around the cabinet's survival or its fall. But before the day was out, the Prime Minister was giving al-Ahrām a categorical denial of what it had published; and the following morning al-Ahrām reaffirmed what it had said, refuted the Prime Minister's denial, and its correspondent declared openly and boldly that he had heard this intelligence from more than one minister.

Then the day advanced, evening came, night fell and lifted, and day broke — and during all of this the newspapers connected to the Prime Minister, the newspapers that speak for him, appeared: the Prime Minister silent and not speaking, still and not moving, calm and having no share of activity; and the newspapers that take charge of him, that speak for him and defer to him, silent like him and not speaking, still like him

and not moving, calm like him and not active. Yet how capable these newspapers are of speaking when they wish to wade, with truth and falsehood both, into whatever matters they want to wade into.

There is, then, another bird, ugly in form and hideous in appearance, whose name denotes neither honesty nor counsel nor love of truth — flitting between al-Ahrām and the Prime Minister's office, not knowing where it will settle. It will continue corrupting the atmosphere and injuring souls until it is returned to a nest where it can hide. And there is yet another bird, no less evil and no less rancorous than this one, whose name denotes neither faithfulness in speech, nor the keeping of what is hidden, nor the guarding of secrets — flitting between the ministers' offices, not knowing which of them to shelter in or which of them to alight upon; it will continue corrupting the atmosphere and injuring souls until its evil is warded off from people.

And then there is another bird — frightening and alarming, not entirely hideous, not entirely ugly, but a mixture of the two. In it there is the denunciation of evil, the repudiation of lying and the disclosure of secrets; in it there is the seeking of good, the pursuit of truth, the zealous guarding of honesty and the keeping of what is hidden. This bird was watchful as one who appears to be sleeping, active as one who appears to be calm, in motion as one who appears to be still — and when those raucous birds let out their incessant shrieks, it launched from its watchfulness and activity in tremendous force. It soars through every atmosphere, alights at every gathering, listens to every conversation, picks up every piece of intelligence, and refuses to allow people to rest or find ease until they and it together see the face of truth clearly in what was said and what is being said. It refuses to let people rest until they know who spoke truth in the matter of the telephone conversation. Is it the Prime Minister? Then Egypt's Plenipotentiary Minister in London must be asked how he attributed to the Prime Minister something other than the truth, and how he related what had not happened. Or is it Egypt's Plenipotentiary Minister in London? Then the Prime Minister must be asked how he permitted himself to deny a minister who represents Egypt's dignity and majesty in a foreign country — England — and among a foreign people — the English. Or is it the newspapers, which

attributed to both men what neither of them said, and added to both men what neither of them did? These newspapers must be asked how they permitted themselves to expose the Prime Minister and a plenipotentiary minister of state to what is said about them — by one or both — of departing from truth and turning away from the right.

This bird called Suspicion has no wish to rest, nor to let the people rest, until it and they together see the face of truth shining clear and luminous — in what passed between al-Ahrām and the Prime Minister, or rather in what passed between the Prime Minister and his colleagues. For the cabinet's silence in the face of al-Ahrām's challenge, and the silence of the cabinet's newspapers in the face of this challenge, and the drowning of this cabinet and its newspapers in a deep silence after al-Ahrām's correspondent published his account yesterday morning — this is clear evidence that the man neither invented nor fabricated anything; he was informed, and so he spoke; he was told something, and so he broadcast it among his readers. And in all probability those who spoke to him had wanted him to broadcast this account, to assure the people that the cabinet was in no danger and had nothing to fear.

It therefore appears that al-Ahrām has emerged from this battle victorious and truthful — no blame upon it and no reproach. This bird wants it to be established — and wants the people to establish with it — who among them spoke other than the truth. Is it the ministers? Then they must be asked how they attributed to their leader what he did not say, and charged him with what did not emanate from him. For if they claim that their leader spoke to them what they reported of him, they must be asked how they disclosed his secret, uncovered his concealment, failed to keep his counsel hidden, and did not honour their obligation to guard it.

Or is it the Prime Minister? Then he must be asked when he spoke other than the truth. Was it when he spoke to some of his colleagues what al-Ahrām published — in which case he was not straightforward with them, did not show them the plain face of the matter, but rather beguiled them with hopes and fed them with illusions? Or was it when he denied what al-Ahrām published, knowing that al-Ahrām had published nothing

but the truth and said nothing but honest fact? In that case he must be asked how he permitted himself to confront the entire nation openly with something other than the truth, and to do so deliberately, knowing full well that this deliberateness is something that neither politics permits nor morality approves.

Do you see the deplorable atmosphere in which we live? Do you see this suffocating environment in which we struggle? Do you see how truth and lying are intermingled? Do you see how right and wrong are confused? Do you see how honesty and betrayal are entangled? Do you see how suspicion has become one of the principles of politics, and one of the foundations of the relationship between the governing and the governed? Do you see all of this? Have you thought about all of this? Have you measured all of this against the people's love for the cabinet, their confidence in it, and their trust in it? Have you measured the effect of all of this on the morals of people in their dealings with one another, in their conversations with one another, in their entrusting one another with secrets? Do you not agree with me that these foul and raucous birds that are turbulent in Egypt's atmosphere now, filling it with corruption and evil, deserve to be driven from this atmosphere so that something of good and wholeness may return to it?

Indeed, you see things as I see them, and you are as eager as I am that the atmosphere should clear, so that politics may be set right and morals may be reformed. But who is it that can drive these corrupting birds from Egypt's atmosphere? One of two men: the Prime Minister, when he resigns — or the Public Prosecutor, when he orders an inquiry.