

The Motorcar

Kawkab al-Sharq, 4 May 1933

God — exalted and glorified be He — is not ashamed to use as a parable a gnat or anything above it, for He uses parables only to impart wisdom and wholesome counsel, to show men the straight path and to turn them from the crooked. We are therefore within our rights — indeed, it is incumbent upon us — to comport ourselves in accordance with the manner of the Holy Quran, and to think nothing of speaking to people about a small thing: a motorcar, or something above it, the better to reveal for them the crookedness in the policy of the sitting Ministry, whether that policy concerns itself with great matters or with small.

People know well enough the crookedness in the Ministry's policy when it concerns itself with irrigation, erecting a barrage here and laying the groundwork for a barrage there, turning away in all of this from the counsel of those who counsel and the advice of those who advise; and they know equally well the crookedness in the Ministry's policy when it concerns itself with religion, declaring that it will pay nothing but paper, yet pressing ahead all the while with a legal dispute, without finding the courage to issue a decisive ruling in this matter that would cut through the doubt and dispel the confusion.

They know the crookedness in the policy of the sitting Ministry when it concerns itself with university independence, narrowing it until it is reduced to its most rudimentary form, small enough to fit in a little box that the Minister of Traditions can slip into his pocket; and they know it when it broadens the authority of al-Azhar until the whole of the state's schools are engulfed by it.

They know the crookedness in the Ministry's policy when it concerns itself with matters other than irrigation, religion, and education — with the great public utilities of Egypt — so there is no harm, then, in lingering for a moment over this motorcar, even though it is still in Paris being fitted out and readied, awaiting the arrival of the Prime Minister!

For I wish to speak of this motorcar, which has been the talk of the newspapers: the one purchased by the state for the Prime Minister, to convey him about Europe during his forthcoming leave.

It is said that when the Prime Minister combined with the Presidency the portfolios of two other ministries, he enjoyed the use of three motorcars: one for the Presidency, one for Finance, and one for the Interior. When the economic crisis intensified and tightened its grip, the Prime Minister, sensing the state's need for economy, ordered one of these three motorcars to be sold, and its price was returned to the state treasury; and the state saved what that motorcar used to cost in daily expenses. Do not ask why the Prime Minister did not sell two of these motorcars, nor why he did not content himself with a single car instead of two — adding economy to economy and prudence to prudence. Do not ask why the Prime Minister did not sell all three motorcars and content himself with his private car, meeting its expenses from state funds if the state was bound in any case to bear the cost of his transportation. You may be told that you are ignorant of ministers' customs and what has become their habit in Egypt when one poses or ponders such a question.

The Prime Minister, then, sold one of his three motorcars and made do with two. Then he fell ill and was compelled to reconstruct his Ministry, relinquishing the Interior to a new minister. The new Minister of the Interior arrived to find that the ministerial car had been sold, and that there was no car in the whole Ministry of the Interior in which the minister could be conveyed during his tenure there — or he found a car or cars that were not fit for a minister's standing, especially since he had been an under-secretary and was now a minister, and the transition ought to be accompanied by such marks of dignity and grandeur as befitted it, among them that the minister's car should be grander and finer than the other cars in the Ministry. So the Prime Minister surrendered the Presidency car to his former subordinate and new colleague, and from that moment he had only one car — the Finance car. But he was both a president and a minister; he possessed two titles and so ought to have two cars, and it was not fitting that he should be like any ordinary minister, possessed of a single car. He was therefore dissatisfied with the Finance car and resolved to purchase another for the Presidency. You may note — not that it does any good to do so — that the Prime Minister was ill and that his movements were few and his journeys limited; one car would have served him well enough. But as I have told you, he held two titles, and therefore he was obliged to have two cars! Do not say that the Minister of Traditions also holds two titles — that he is both Minister of Education and President of the University, and so ought also to have two cars:

The Education car and the University car. For the difference between the Minister of Traditions and the Prime Minister is quite plain: the Minister of Traditions does not receive the university presidency by decree; rather, it is an attribute that grows up in him as it grows, and protrudes from him as it protrudes, being altogether more like an incidental affliction than anything else, and one that clings to him inexorably, impossible to shed except by resigning from the Ministry. As for the Finance Ministry, the Prime Minister can relinquish it, just as he relinquished the Interior; and it appears he intended to relinquish the Finance Ministry on some future day, which is why he kept its car for the minister-in-waiting and bought the Presidency this car of its own.

In all likelihood, as people say, Cairo has motorcars for sale: the grand sort that befits prime ministers, the middling sort that befits ministers, and the modest sort that befits ordinary people. In all likelihood, too, purchasing these motorcars in Cairo would be more in keeping with the customary practice and closer to economy. Yet the Prime Minister was to travel to Europe on an extended leave, to convalesce and recuperate, and as we said yesterday he ought not to avail himself in Europe of the modes of transport used by the common run of people; he must have his car. And as long as he was Prime Minister and as long as he was Finance Minister, he ought to have two cars travelling with him wherever he went. He would ride in one as Prime Minister and in the other as Finance Minister! Each would convey him at such moments as he dwelled in thought upon one of these two capacities in isolation. Should he ponder both together, he would ride in both cars at once — but our Prime Minister is too considerate of the state treasury and too protective of state funds to burden it with all these expenses, and so he would make do with one of the two cars in Europe, riding it now as Prime Minister and again as Finance Minister, sheathing both swords in a single scabbard when there is no alternative!

And in his solicitude for the state treasury and his watchfulness over state funds, our Prime Minister shrank from the expense of shipping a single car to Europe and back at the state's cost, and resolved to cancel one of the two journeys. He would therefore purchase the car in Paris and keep it in Paris until he arrived there — and the state should recognise his glorious merits and his white-handed beneficence! After all this, it is said that our Prime Minister squanders state funds — how could he who saved the state millions be a squanderer? How could he squander state funds when his position entitled him to travel with two cars and he

travelled with but one? And how could he squander state funds when his position entitled him to ship his car there and back, and he contented himself with shipping it back without the going?

Can you not see that the Prime Minister's own newspaper is perfectly right to rebuke those people who rebuke the Prime Minister for this rebuke? The Prime Minister is excused if he chafes at this censure and resents it — for it points to nothing but one thing: that Egyptians are a people who know not gratitude, who do not acknowledge favour or thank those who do them good! Had Egyptians been a people who appreciated men and deeds, and expressed thanks for every kindness, they would have sent to the Prime Minister petitions — not of confidence, for the Prime Minister has had his fill of confidence, almost to the point where the surfeit pains him, especially in the wake of the Chamber of Deputies' vote of confidence the day before yesterday — but petitions of praise and commendation, of thanks and acknowledgement of his generosity, for he has renounced all these prerogatives out of devotion to the state treasury and protective concern for its funds, preferring that the money thus foregone be spent on relieving the poor and the destitute, or on paying the school fees of those pupils whom the Minister of Traditions is expelling from the schools. Had Egyptians been a people who appreciated men and deeds and acknowledged the merits of those who deserved them, this gracious act would not have slipped by the Chamber of Deputies, nor would this noble deed have escaped the Senate! Yet all is not lost: the parliamentary session has not yet run its course, and it remains possible for Egyptians to wipe from themselves the stain of this dereliction, for Parliament to make good what has been neglected, for the entire nation to give thanks, for the entire Parliament to give thanks to the Prime Minister for this great service!!

But the Prime Minister did travel to Europe this past summer, and his journey was described in exhaustive and elaborate detail — and not one of those who reported on it told us anything of the car, or the cars, by which he was conveyed.

The Prime Minister had three distinct attributes last summer. Did he travel with three motorcars? Or had he sold the Interior car and so travelled with two? Or had he felt the severity of the crisis so keenly that he travelled with just one? Or did he travel without a car at all — and having taken up residence in Europe and moved about it, found this was costing the state more than was proper, and so resolved to purchase a car to await him there?

These are questions upon which we freely confess our ignorance of the answers, and we should be most grateful if the Ministry's own newspaper would be good enough to furnish them; for the answers may contain another of the Prime Minister's noble deeds that the public ought to know about!!

There is a further matter that compels reflection, as it fills the heart with admiration and the soul with reverence for the Prime Minister — or for the deputies who serve him. For our Prime Minister was ill when the Presidency car was transferred to the Minister of the Interior. Was it he himself who thought of giving this car to the new minister, of purchasing another in its place, and of having this new car await him in Paris for the reasons we have already set out? If so, our admiration for the Prime Minister is boundless!!

How could we fail to be seized with admiration and filled with reverence for him? His illness was severe and frightening, and the affairs of state crowding in upon him were many, intricate, and complex — yet his fearful, debilitating illness, and his intricate, complex responsibilities, did not prevent him from thinking about surrendering one car and purchasing another to await him in Paris. Or is it, perhaps, that those who thought of this and carried it out were the President's own associates and protégés among the civil servants? In that case, our admiration for these associates and protégés is boundless! Observe them — how they devote themselves to their chief and immerse themselves entirely in caring for him, thinking nothing of replacing his old car with a new one, selecting for him a car splendid and beautiful, of an exquisite design, to be kept in Paris until the Prime Minister arrives.

Do you see that we were not wrong when we addressed you in this small tale — the tale of the car purchased for the Prime Minister while other writers address their readers on the budgets, the interpellations, the High Commissioner's return or remaining in London, and what they call the political situation? Do you see that our address to you on this car has led you — and us — to certain qualities which all those who dedicate themselves to public life ought to weigh and reflect upon? The first of these qualities is economy: prime ministers ought not to fall short of it however trifling and small the saving may be, and they have in this the example of our Prime Minister, who chose in the matter of this car to prioritise economy as he did.

The second of these qualities is vigilance in the service of both the public interest and the private — however subtle and obscure that interest may be. We ought not to be distracted from this service by illness, however frightening, nor by business, however intricate.

The third of these qualities is selfless devotion to one's superiors. When your chief falls ill, you ought not to neglect his motorcar; and when your chief travels abroad, you ought not to forget that he may return. Here, however, there is a problem — one I leave to you and to other readers to work out, as long as loyalty to one's superiors is an obligation and as long as subordinates are duty-bound to take account of their chiefs' movements when they rest and their repose when they move. For it may well be that those who serve the Ministry have the right, on reflection, to conclude that however long they have held ministerial office and however long they have occupied their posts, they may one day resign.

Believe me, dear reader: it is incumbent upon you not to shrink from long reflection on the most trivial and negligible of things — even when those things happen to resemble a Prime Minister's motorcar!

Kawkab al-Sharq, 4 May 1933