

Despair...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 4 June 1934

No matter if Egyptians go hungry — they are well accustomed to hunger, even though their land is fertile and rich in fruit. No matter if Egyptians go thirsty — they are well accustomed to thirst, even though their Nile flows full and sweet. No matter if Egyptians suffer — they are well accustomed to suffering, even though their country is made to be the most fortunate on earth.

No matter — hunger, thirst, suffering: the Egyptians are long accustomed to all of this and at home with it. They are a sensible people, accomplished in patience, proficient in endurance, adept at finding excuses for their lords and masters when these lords and masters fail to furnish them a pleasant and comfortable life, or a life that affords them some measure of ease and plenty, and a little of wellbeing and prosperity.

For it is not the sensible man who chafes at affliction when it strikes, or recoils from catastrophe when it falls — chafing at afflictions does not drive them away, and recoiling from catastrophes does not turn them back. Rather, the sensible man is he who endures and bears, and bows before calamities and misfortunes. He may wait for death in silence until death overtakes him, and he may send forth from his grieving breast plaintive moans to be borne by the wind and fill the air with them, or carried by the rays of the sun and moon and stars to fill the reaches of the universe — for who knows: perhaps this groaning, failing to move the souls of the people who inhabit the earth, may yet move the hearts of those who are not human among the inhabitants of the planets and stars.

Egyptians have grown accustomed to suffering, and they have grown accustomed to complaining, and time has grown accustomed to bearing their bitter, painful complaint — carrying it from yesterday to today, and carrying it from today to tomorrow, while the generations pass it among themselves, and children learn from it how to weep for their fathers and pity their grandchildren.

The newspapers tell us this morning that the Council of Ministers has met, and met again, soared and then alighted, and arrived in the end at the restful despair of finding the decisive solution that the Finance Minister had so longed for and the people so yearned for. The problem of mortgage debt will therefore remain unresolved — its crisis uneased, its

shadow unlifted, its harm not removed from the Egyptians.

And yet — how many times the Finance Minister gave his word, and gave it to excess; how many times the Prime Minister spoke, and spoke at length; how many times the partisans and allies made their speeches; and how many times both the one side and the other paraded before the people sweet hopes that have now proved to be lies.

The Finance Minister used to say that he would accomplish what no one had accomplished before him — that he would not settle for quarter-solutions or half-solutions, but wanted complete, comprehensive solutions, the kind that would satisfy the Egyptians and relieve them, and renew their energy and their smile for life.

The Prime Minister used to elevate himself, in something of a humility quite foreign to politics and its conversations, and to boast, in something of a charming pride, of his concern for economic reform and his desire to resolve its problems. He used to mingle humility with pride, declaring that he was not able to perform miracles, but that he would spend what he possessed and do what he could to put right what must be put right. And the Prime Minister used to rise until he reached the stars, then cast from there a glance full of scorn and contempt upon those crooked, lame solutions that Sidqi Pasha had devised — or contrived — for the problems of mortgage debt; and he used to declare, in the serenity befitting great men and the composure befitting those who speak only from surety and issue only from conviction, that he did not want the turbulent solutions that resolve nothing, but rather the decisive solutions that leave no doubt and no confusion, no disagreement and no fear.

Then a month passes, followed by another month, followed in turn by a month and more months, while the decisive, resolute solutions are sought. The Finance Minister dives for them in the sea; the Finance Minister descends for them into the depths of the earth; the Finance Minister soars for them in the heights of the sky. The Prime Minister waits, the Egyptians wait, the creditors press, the debtors cry out for help, the days pass, the weeks succeed one another, the months follow each other, anxieties bear down on the Egyptians, calamities beset them on every side, their groaning is unbroken, and time echoes the reverberations of their complaint.

Until the moment comes and the hour arrives, the mountain labours and brings forth a mouse, and all these titanic efforts resolve into a report submitted by the Finance Minister to the Council of Ministers —

which has barely considered it before the Council is disagreeing over its particulars and its details. Then debate multiplies and disagreement intensifies; the sky rains conflicting, contradictory proposals; the earth throws up further proposals; the air carries proposals, some from Mars and some from Saturn; all these proposals become entangled, the matter grows confused, the wrangling grows fierce.

And in the midst of all this, some of the financial men travel, while those who remain prepare to follow; summer approaches; the Ministry prepares for its rest in Alexandria; and the members of the present Parliament prepare to scatter to the ends of the earth to rest from the toil and seek the bounty of God.

And the truth appears: monstrous and hideous, frightening and repugnant to behold, bitter to taste, heavy to bear — it appears in its most repellent aspect and its most loathsome guise, and sends forth this alarming, violent cry:

No hope of a decisive solution this year — wait, O Egyptians, and God may open the way for your ministers to find one next year!

And then affairs settle into despair, and hearts grow placid in resignation, and the Council of Ministers prepares itself, in ease, security, and contentment, to study one of those provisional solutions that Sidqi Pasha used to favour, on the basis of one of those turbulent foundations that Sidqi Pasha used to prefer.

And so — where are we, and where were we, and where have we ended up, and where are we being driven?

Can the Prime Minister tell us: for what did a ministry fall and a ministry rise? Can the Prime Minister tell us: for what did Sidqi Pasha go down and 'Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha come up?

The political problem has not been resolved, the public debt problem has not been resolved, the mortgage debt problem has not been resolved, and the Ministry's approach to any one of these problems has not changed. Then new problems arose, and the Ministry dealt with them by the very same methods Sidqi Pasha used to apply to whatever problems confronted him: waiting, and promising — then excess in waiting and excess in promising — then reliance on forgetfulness, and the doing of time!

God be praised! Has the moment not yet come for this wretched, miserable people to have its lords and masters look upon its affairs with seriousness and sincerity? God be praised! Has the moment not yet come for this wretched, miserable people to receive from its lords and masters deeds and not words, flour and not the din of the millstone?

God be praised! No problem of this people's problems will be resolved unless this people is master of itself, dealing with its problems from knowledge of them and willingness to bear their consequences — relying not on some infallible company, nor seeking in that the help of a colonial company that wishes it harm, plots against it with cunning, and lies in wait for its downfall.

God be praised! When will the days reveal to this people its freedom, its dignity, and its independence? For it was not created to be a humble, exploited slave — it was created to be free and dignified and independent: willing and carrying out what it wills, speaking and completing what it speaks.

Taha Hussein

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