

Strain

Kawkab al-Sharq, 29 May 1933

I do not know whether the Egyptians have ever, on any day, reached the degree of sensitivity, irritability, and constriction of breast that they have reached now — but the thing beyond doubt is that they have arrived, through all of this, at a point where they are wounded by everything, pained by everything, and thrown out of their composure by the slightest and least consequential of matters. The bonds between them are on the verge of severe corruption, for they have grown too weak even to bear playfulness, or to smile at jest and banter! The source of this, it appears, is what they are enduring of this political and economic strain that has dragged on too long and grown too heavy a burden — a strain they are most zealous to stand firm against, to endure patiently, and to resist as men resist who know how to meet adversity and stand firm against the vicissitudes of the days. They are exhausting, or nearly exhausting, the whole of their strength in bearing political and economic pains without showing weakness of judgement, or faintness of nature, or dissolution of resolve, and without giving the foreigner or the present cabinet any cause to hope for advantage over them.

They wish to appear generous and dignified before the English and before this cabinet, and they likewise wish to appear dignified among themselves, bearing what they bear of the heaviest forms of economic deprivation without one of them revealing to another his hidden distress, and without any of them sensing his friends' compassion for him, or their sympathy towards him, or their awareness of the hardship and constriction he is in. And when a man exerts this violent effort to compel himself to bear what cannot be borne, and to be patient with what he is unaccustomed to being patient with, and when this matter drags on so that he spends months and years on it without finding any way out of it, or any lightening, however slight, of some of its burdens — it is only natural that his resistance to lesser matters should weaken, just as the man who fasts, finding the fast hard and exhausting and costly to him in every kind of toil, expends all his effort in enduring this hardship and standing firm against this toil until his fast is complete — yet grows weak in resisting other things unrelated to the fast, becoming quick to anger,

oversensitive, irritable, generally ill-tempered.

This condition appears to be general now in Egypt; you observe it in many of the cabinet's supporters, and you observe it in many of the cabinet's adversaries, and you observe it among people who ought to belong to neither camp. And you will perhaps find this phenomenon stronger in ministerial circles than in any other circle. You have seen what happened in Parliament, and it is likely you will see much more of the same. You will see it among the deputies, among the senators, and among the ministers themselves. A deputy sets about declaring an opinion, and the Chamber grows so impatient with him that it nearly assaults him! Then it will accept from him neither silence nor a defence in the newspapers, and will be satisfied with nothing but an apology! Another deputy sets about defending an opinion, his chest tightens, his tongue runs free, and he subjects the Chamber and the cabinet to what neither of them welcomes; the Chamber grows impatient with him, and he grows impatient with the Chamber, and storms out enraged and furious. The Chamber proceeds in its uproar and denunciation until the Speaker is compelled to adjourn the session. Then, once the anger has subsided in both the offending deputy and the offended Chamber, the session resumes, and there is apology, and there is forgiveness! Another deputy sets about criticising the cabinet and feels no scruple in calling it foolish! The cabinet's patience grows thin, yet it neither defends itself, nor answers severity with severity, nor criticism with criticism — but one of its members shouts at the deputy to be silent! And if he does not comply, the ministers walk out and abandon the field in fury! The Chamber erupts and descends into turmoil, with shouting multiplying, feet stamping, and hands raised; then the session is adjourned, and some deputies set about gathering their colleagues' views in favour of expelling this deputy; then the anger subsides in everyone, and there is apology and contrition, and there is pardon and forgiveness. And calm returns to the atmosphere of Parliament!

The same thing occurs in the Senate, without the senators being spared, by whatever dignity, gravity, and soundness of judgement ought to be theirs, from this same fate: they too erupt and seethe, are roused and surge, wrong one another and apologise to one another, and forgive

one another!!

And if you leave aside the ministers, senators, and deputies, you will see this same sensitivity, irritability, and quickness to anger in other circles. The government's departments grow severely impatient with what is written about them in the newspapers, their breasts filling with resentment at any criticism. There are official complaints marked by harshness and sharpness, by violence and by excess beyond all reasonable intent — to the point that even the Public Prosecution has shown in these days something of this same sensitivity, irritability, and quickness to anger, multiplying its summonses of journalists, its interrogation and investigation of them — though it has been somewhat moderate in this. The newspapers took note of this activity, discussed it, and considered how to guard against it, charging their press syndicate council with the task of working on it for a week and then presenting the result of this effort when the council reconvenes after a few days.

The newspapers themselves, among one another, are oversensitive and irritable, with almost anything throwing them off balance, exceeding the tolerance they had once grown accustomed to and at ease with — so that in this period none of them shows patience towards another, none stands firm against another, and one paper simply grows impatient with another and rushes to the Public Prosecution or to the courts.

Politicians themselves — those who do not occupy themselves with the daily or weekly press, but rather, if the expression is fair, with high politics — have found their breasts growing tight, with strain reaching them from criticism directed at them that they used to tolerate before. Perhaps they once paid it no attention and gave it no heed; perhaps they once made light of some of it when joking and jesting — but now they grow impatient with it, detest it most intensely, and rush to the Public Prosecution, setting it against those writers who have, in their view, overstepped the bounds of what they find acceptable!

Even men of letters grow impatient with one another, turn against one another, and take offence at one another over the slightest things, all while possessing a literary sensibility so refined, so excessive in its refinement, so sharp and so steeped in sharpness. Who has not noticed

this fit of temper — or, if you prefer, this sharp reproach — between two well-known men of letters, because one of them set about criticising the other's work and did not pursue the line of criticism the author of the book had been expecting?

All of this indicates that we are exposed, in these days, to a sharp moral crisis that threatens to consume the bonds between us. However clear our excuse may be, however heavy and prolonged the political ordeal, however violent and sharp, however exhausting and scorching the economic crisis, and however much effort it costs us to bear it and stand firm against it — true manhood demands that our share of broad-heartedness, soundness of judgement, and disregard for petty matters should be greater than the share that remains to us now. The man who fasts is excused if his temper sours, but ill temper is not to his credit, and he is not rewarded for it, and it may well spoil the beauty of his fast. Likewise, the one subjected to harsh political ordeal and violent economic crisis is excused if his patience grows thin and he sometimes proves unable to master himself — but this is not to his credit, nor is it commendable in him, and it may well undermine his endurance of the ordeal and his steadfastness in the crisis; it may well make his resistance weaker and feebler; it may well give his adversary cause to hope for advantage over him and to tempt him further; and it may well come between him and the beautiful outcome that the strong and patient ought rightfully to attain.

And if overlooking injuries and rising above petty matters befits a man at all times and in all his moods, it is even more fitting for him, more incumbent upon him, and more honourable for him in times of hardship and ordeal, and in times of strife and turmoil — for it portrays a man's mastery over himself, his control of his emotions, his command of his passions and inclinations, and his genuine readiness to be truly a man of struggle, one who knows how to outlast the days and triumph over adversity.

How fitting it would be, then, for the deputies, senators, and ministers to be patient with one another, to overlook one another's faults, and to make allowance for one another; and how fitting it would be for the

deputies, senators, ministers, and officials to bear criticism with courage, equanimity, and a smile. And how especially fitting it would be for the newspapers to be patient with one another, and to accept from one another now what they used to accept yesterday before the crisis and what they will accept tomorrow after the crisis. And how fitting it would be for politicians to prefer broad-heartedness, and to rise above this anger unbecoming to the truly forbearing.

And how fitting it would be, further, for men of letters to smile at one another — indeed, to tease one another playfully — without letting that spoil the bonds between them. As for writers, how fitting it would be for them to prefer patience, wisdom, self-mastery, the subduing of passion, and the pursuit of truth in what they write.

How fitting it would be for all Egyptians that this ordeal should not throw them out of their composure, and that this crisis should not muddy the affection, love, and purity of feeling that have been their consolation.