

Savages

Kawkab al-Sharq, 24 May 1933

God forbid that we should love this word, or that we should prefer it, or that we should take it as the title for one of our pieces out of any satisfaction with it or inclination toward it — but it has become an official word! It has earned one of the civil rights! There remains nothing for us to do but acknowledge for it this right that it has earned, and grant it this distinction that it has won! And what right could be greater than for this word to be uttered by a deputy among the deputies, in the Chamber of Deputies, from the rostrum of the Deputies, and beneath the dome of Parliament! And what distinction more distinguished, what merit more meritorious, than for this word to be recorded in the minutes of the Chamber of Deputies — recorded as having been hurled by a deputy in the face of the ministers and his fellow deputies!

Yes, this word has been distinguished, has earned rights, and the press may as well make free use of obsolete expressions and adopt them as titles for the pieces it writes, now that the deputies have granted them civil rights. The Chamber of Deputies must now stand in place of the Language Academy, which was announced and never came to be, resolved upon and never constituted. It is my strong suspicion that the Minister of Traditions reckoned that the Chamber of Deputies could dispense with this Academy altogether — that it might revive obsolete speech (and I nearly dictated “abandonment” myself) and add to the language what is not in it. And since the Chamber of Deputies is capable of legislating on everything, supervising everything, and adjudicating everything, then, God willing, it is capable of legislating on language, supervising it, and adjudicating it too!!

But the Chamber of Deputies did not, yesterday — and perhaps it means to today — fix the meaning of this word “savages.” For no word has any value unless its meaning is fixed and what it denotes is made precise. The deputy who uttered this word and admitted it into the parliamentary lexicon was angry, agitated, of disturbed temper; it must be assumed, then, that he intended by it neither jest nor humor nor banter — let alone that he intended by it a greeting to the Chamber or a tribute to it!

The Speaker of the Chamber took offense at this word, on his own behalf and on behalf of the nation’s deputies and the ministers of state,

and asked the honorable deputy to withdraw it. It appears that the honorable deputy is a disciple of our teacher, the late Sheikh Muhammad al-Mahdi, may God have mercy on him — for he too once gave offense to certain people with a word that escaped him, and when asked to withdraw it, as the saying goes, he replied: “My son, a word once spoken — how should I withdraw it?” And so the deputy refused to withdraw his word after having said it, and the Chamber took offense — or, more precisely, the Chamber was divided over the impact of this word: was it so severe that the deputies ought to be pained by it, or so slight that the deputies ought to overlook it? For this reason they did not rise up in fury against the author of “savages”! They only pressed him, gently and kindly, to withdraw it and apologize for it. And nothing matched the Chamber’s gentleness but the deputy’s obstinacy! For the Chamber kept pressing for an apology, while the author of “savages” kept repeating “savages,” until, when his colleagues had worn him down, he withdrew not his word but himself, and stormed out of the Chamber in high temper, tearing with his own hands the draft law that the Minister of Traditions had been presenting — a bill the Chamber had been studying and seemed inclined to favor and support. The deputy, for his part, rejected it, holding that the savages would neither put it forward nor accept it!

There, indeed, was sharpness and severity. There, indeed, was uproar and ferment — but it was neither general nor comprehensive. It was confined, rather, to a group of deputies who appear to have hot temperaments and quick sensibilities. The majority of the Chamber inclined toward pardon, counseled forbearance, leaned toward forgiveness — especially if the author of “savages” would consent to come forward with an apology. We shall see today how far this matter goes: will the deputy withdraw his word and remain in the Chamber? Or will the deputy refuse to withdraw his word, and so be withdrawn by the Chamber from among its members — temporarily or otherwise?!

But there is something graver in consequence than the word “savages” and what it signifies, graver than the one who uttered it and his opinion of himself, his colleagues, and his ministers, and their opinion of him. It is this: the legislative session has dragged on too long for the deputies; the term has worn on until exertion has overtaken them and fatigue has pressed upon them, so that they no longer command themselves, their hands, or their tongues! They have come to take offense at everything, to rise up over everything, and to disown everything.

A man attempts to assault the Prime Minister, and some deputies erupt against the press over it. The Deputy Speaker of the Chamber attempts to state an opinion — however mistaken it may be, however foolish — yet it is an opinion that a deputy has the constitutional right to state, and the deputies erupt over it, and join together to have him removed and expelled, or else he submits and recants, doffing one opinion and donning another in its place, as one changes one shirt for another. The Minister of Traditions attempts to defend one of his draft bills, or the Chamber itself attempts to study one of the draft bills, and one of the deputies erupts and hurls the word “savages” in the faces of the deputies and ministers. And since the deputies’ exertion has reached this pitch, and their exhaustion has brought them to this state, they deserve to rest as the Prime Minister has rested — and being incapable of carrying on with the work, the uproar will only persist in them, and anger will keep pressing upon them until it drives them quite out of their senses. I will not speak here of the nation’s benefit or the interests of the state, for, God willing, these suffer no harm from the deputies, whether they rage or are content, whether they are calm or in uproar. I speak, rather, of the deputies themselves, for they risk their health, their temperaments, and their nerves through this perpetual uproar and this unceasing anger — an affliction we would not wish upon them. And were the Acting Prime Minister disposed to accept advice, we would urge upon him that he read out the decree permitting the deputies to disperse and rest, for the toil of the exhausted does no one any good.

There is, however, something that offers consolation amid this continual turmoil among the deputies: that it is a turmoil which does no injury, an uproar like a fire of straw or a fire of paper — quick to flare, quick to die down. As for the deputy who rose up against the press, he has apologized to the press. As for the deputies who rose up against the Deputy Speaker, they have forgiven the Deputy Speaker. As for the deputy who hurled the word “savages” in the faces of his colleagues and the ministers, he will apologize to the ministers and his colleagues. And so long as the deputies’ fire remains mild and calm, burning nothing and harming no one, then there can be no harm in its flaring up and dying down — indeed, there may even be in its flaring and dying down something of an entertainment for this people, who must expect of their deputies, when they are powerless to relieve them, that they should at least amuse them.

It appears, too, that the matter is not content to stop at the Chamber of Deputies, and that the Senate wishes to rival its younger colleague in displays of sharpness and severity, and in uproar and ferment, for some of the senators cried out, only days ago, in the face of the President or the Vice President: "You wish to treat us as our colleagues in the Chamber of Deputies are treated!" Neither the President nor the Vice President paid this outcry any heed — just as the Speaker of the Deputies paid no heed to the outcries of his deputies.

The Public Works budget was, it is said, snatched away from the Senate just as it was snatched away from the Chamber of Deputies! Then came the Railways budget, and with it came another uproar, followed by another snatching-away! And this morning's edition of Al-Ahram appeared, and lo, a senator was complaining of the Council to the people, charging it with accusations the least of which might be called grave. For the Council — in the view of this venerable senator — deprives its members of freedom of speech, comes between them and the declaration of their opinions, and pushes the chapters and sections of the budget through at a speed ill-suited to honest dealing — God forgive me — indeed, this Council conducts the whole of its business in a manner ill-suited to honest dealing, and out of all proportion to the compensation its members draw!

And I assure the Senate, the Chamber of Deputies, the Council of Ministers, and the Attorney General that I do not speak these words of my own accord, nor do I improvise them on the spur of the moment — God forbid that I should put myself in so delicate a position, so precarious a predicament. I am merely summarizing what the honorable Sheikh said in Al-Ahram. And the honorable Sheikh said more than this: he announced to the people, to the ministers, and to the senators as well, that he has views on the Railways budget which he was prevented from declaring from the rostrum of Parliament, and which he will therefore declare from the rostrum of the press, in Al-Ahram. And so: a deputy accuses the Chamber of Deputies of savagery, and a senator accuses the Senate of — what? Of despotism, for it prevents people from declaring their opinions; and of a breach of parliamentary trust, for it disposes of the affairs of state in haste; and because its members put their own occupations and recreations before attending to the affairs of state, and then draw the money of the state without just claim to it — since the Council's labors do not match the compensation its members draw!!!

I have no wish to draw any conclusion, for every man is capable of drawing his own. Nor do I wish to demand anything, for it is not permitted to us to demand anything in a case such as this — but I think it likely that the senators will, when they assemble, be angry with their colleague, just as the deputies were angry with theirs yesterday; and that the senators will demand of their colleague not merely that he withdraw his word, but that he withdraw an entire article containing words, sentences, and accusations now uttered.

And so Cairo will witness, this evening, two uprisings: an uprising in the Chamber of Deputies, and an uprising in the Senate — but both, God willing, will be of the lightest possible kind, of the calmest possible kind. The fire in neither will blaze up before an apology puts it out!! And then the night will pass and the day will dawn, and you will read that the draft laws and the chapters of the budget are passing through both chambers at a speed which the express train itself could not match.