

Illusion

Kawkab al-Sharq, 6 May 1933

The Ministry is secure in everything, secure in domestic affairs, because order is stable, because the people love it, and because its opponents have lost everything and failed in everything — yet a false report reaches it from Minufiya that some people are making bombs, and it is thrown into such turmoil that it loses its good sense and strays from sound judgement. At once the police of every province and the officers of the district gather, mobilise, and march to wherever the Ministry's informant claimed the bombs were being made; at once an organised siege is laid upon the town, an organised search conducted of its houses, and severe restrictions imposed upon its inhabitants, with excessive harassment of all who leave it or enter it. Then it emerges that a man had wished to toy with the Ministry, and so lied to it and made a mockery of it, forcing it to incur the expenses it incurred, to cause the disturbance it caused, to strip the district of its guards and its keepers of security, and to expose dozens of people to grave danger to life and property. And the Ministry is secure in everything, because its opponents have lost everything and failed in everything, and because it has come to trust in the people's love for it, their confidence in it, and their reassurance toward it.

Yet a false report reaches it that the President of the Wafd will perform the Friday prayer in one of the quarters of Cairo, and at once police are mobilised, soldiers stand watch, military preparations are made in that quarter, restrictions are imposed on those going to prayer or leaving for their work, and readiness is made for a decisive battle like all the battles for which the Ministry makes ready — and then it emerges to be nothing but a fancy within a fancy: the President never visited that quarter, nor thought of visiting it, but performed his prayer in another quarter of the city altogether.

And with all this, the Ministry is secure in everything, because order is stable and security is abundant. Here is the Prime Minister resting on his farms; here is the Minister of Traditions—as he calls the Minister of Education—visiting Mansoura; and here is the Minister of Agriculture campaigning across Upper Egypt — for if everything were not calm and reassuring, the Ministers would not have scattered in this fashion. Nor is there any harm in the Ministers scattering, so long as the Minister of the Interior sits firmly in Cairo, able to gather the police and disperse them,

able to hurl units of troops wherever he wishes, into villages, towns, and quarters alike.

Everything is calm — even though an unknown man's lie is enough to alarm the government! And everything is reassuring — even though a mere phantom of Mustafa al-Nahhas is enough to disturb the State, mobilise the troops, and invade quiet, secure neighbourhoods! It is indeed God's will that contradictions should gather together in this country, so that everything in it is at once calm and at once anxious, so that the government is alarmed by everything in it, terrified even by phantoms! And the Ministry and its newspapers proclaim that the Ministry has never, on any day, been stronger than it is now! And the Ministry believes that the people believe it, and trust in its strength, its resolve, its calm, and its quiet. And the Ministry is secure in everything in its foreign affairs too: its own affairs and the affairs of the State all proceed exactly as it loves and desires. For France and Italy have submitted, swearing their solemn oaths that they will accept payment of the debt to them in paper, not in gold. And the proof of this is that the Ministers scatter, that their President spends the weekend in the countryside — even though everything indicates that France is holding fast to her position, not departing from it by a hair's breadth, not altering a single letter of it, and that Italy will change nothing in the matter unless France first changes her stance.

As for the Gebel Aulia tenders, they have now been studied at the Ministry of Public Works; the Minister of Public Works has formed his own free and independent opinion of them, and will lay this opinion before the Council of Ministers for it to confirm, free and independent — even though the newspapers say the matter is not as it is being presented, that the fate of these tenders will be decided against the Ministry's wishes, and that the Ministry will submit to what it does not love, because it does not wish to provoke a crisis by crossing the English. And so the will of the English shall prevail in these tenders, in spite of the Council of Ministers and in spite of whatever the Council of Ministers may desire, and the Council of Ministers will submit to that will in haste and in a hurry, before the Senate has even finished examining the budget of the Ministry of Public Works and approving the appropriation it contains for Gebel Aulia — and both chambers will find themselves equally compromised! One bows to foreign opinion, and the other consents to be confronted with the fait accompli.

Yet the Ministry is secure in everything, in its domestic affairs and its foreign affairs alike; it has never, on any day, been stronger than it is now! Did its President not tell his colleagues, in their council, that his friend the High Commissioner was returning to Egypt beyond any doubt, and would reside in it beyond any doubt, and that the Anglo-Egyptian Committee had failed entirely and fallen short entirely in all it had attempted toward changing the political situation in Egypt? Indeed he did say this to his colleagues, even though he now claims he said no such thing — for al-Ahram confirmed its report and challenged the Prime Minister directly, and he found no answer to give, and did nothing about it! And so the High Commissioner is indeed returning to Egypt beyond any doubt, and will indeed reside in it beyond any doubt — even though it has been officially announced that his return has been postponed to an unknown date, and that his wife will join him later; and the Anglo-Egyptian Committee has indeed failed in its endeavour to change the situation — even though talk among people in Cairo and in London continues to suggest that this Committee has not yet concluded its endeavour, and that the Ministry's resignation, at a date very soon to come, is a matter that cannot be avoided; and when the Foreign Secretary was asked, only days ago, about Egyptian affairs in the British House of Commons, he said nothing at all — because the time has not yet come for the British Foreign Secretary to say what he ought to say.

Everything is calm around the Ministry, within Egypt and beyond it, and everything is reassuring — but it is a calm born of illusion, a reassurance spoken by fancy. As for the truth that everything actually points to, it is this: that the grounds for the Ministry's survival have grown so thin that the slightest thing has become capable of severing them. Its strength within Egypt is illusory — were it not so, lies would never have toyed with it, nor fancy played upon it; and its strength beyond Egypt is illusory — were it not so, al-Ahram would never have challenged it with such disregard for its strength, such inattention to its authority, such fearlessness before it, for true might, the kind that is feared, is that which rests upon truth. And the Ministry, in its present position, does not rest upon truth; and the Ministry, in its present position, does not rest upon reality, but rests upon illusion and clings to the hems of fancy. And we cannot say what would become of the Ministry if false reports reached it from every corner of Egypt every single day — would it wear out the police across every province, send officers and soldiers circling everywhere, and lead people to imagine that abundant security had vanished and stable order had been thrown into disorder?

Nor can we say what would become of the Ministry if al-Ahram were to strike it with this same defiance every single day, as it has done in these last few days — would it issue official communiqués in response? For if al-Ahram persists in what it says, the Ministry will demean itself, and submit to al-Ahram as it submitted last week, until people come to believe — if they have not already come to believe in fact — that the government's communiqués are merely respected, but that respecting them and believing them are two very different things.

And here is al-Ahram speaking today just as it spoke yesterday, pressing today just as it pressed yesterday, affirming today just as it affirmed yesterday, that the Ministry is rushing to settle the Gebel Aulia tenders before the Senate has finished examining the Public Works budget.

And here is al-Siyasa saying today that the matter of these tenders will be settled against the wishes of the Egyptian government, while people talk and press the point in their talk that the question of the debt grows more complicated by the day, and that difficulty is closing in upon the Ministry from one moment to the next, even as the Ministers scatter across the provinces and their President rests in the countryside. Do you suppose the Ministry will issue official communiqués to give the lie to al-Ahram and al-Siyasa? And what, pray, could it possibly do, if al-Ahram and al-Siyasa were to respect the government's communiqués, and yet still persist, after that, in saying what they say?

It is no strange thing that the Ministry should claim strength for itself, and that it should reassure itself with the promise of a long survival — for every human being is prone to hope, and every human being is prone to being deceived by fancy. What is strange is rather this: that the affairs of a country like Egypt should be left, with all the danger that besets them, and despite the fact that they are the affairs of an entire people, subject to a Ministry whose every strength rests upon illusion and draws its sustenance from fancy!