

Necessity

Kawkab al-Sharq, 14 June 1933

It must be a harsh and pressing necessity — this necessity which drove the Cabinet yesterday to plunge the Chamber of Deputies back into the fairest days of turmoil, after it had grown accustomed to calm and stability these past days. A man may search, and search deeply; a man may think, and think long, seeking some explanation for the ministers' conduct yesterday toward the Speaker of the Chamber, and find nothing but a single thing: that some harsh and pressing necessity compelled the ministers to rid themselves of this project, over which talk had already dragged on, and which seemed set to drag on longer still. The Chamber of Deputies had already passed for the Cabinet projects that, if not graver in danger and further-reaching in their financial consequence than the Lake Tana project, were certainly no less grave, no lighter a matter. It passed for it the Jebel Aulia project, which will cost us millions, brushing aside for it the opinion of the Under-Secretary of Finance, who had been categorical that this project ought now to be set aside; it brushed aside for it, too, the opinion of the Financial Adviser, no less insistent than the Under-Secretary's that this project ought to be set aside; and it authorized for it various financial dispositions which it would have been better either not to authorize at all, or to withhold until after study and scrutiny. The Cabinet had thus grown accustomed, from Parliament in general and the Chamber of Deputies in particular, to a certain deference, a certain indulgence, which it found no easy thing to be deprived of yesterday, or to imagine the Chamber might begrudge it. It appears that this Lake Tana project holds some special significance for the Cabinet, and that it clings to it with an eagerness the least that can be said of which is that it is intense, and inexplicable. No sooner had this project appeared on the horizon than people grew uneasy with it, persisted in objecting to it, pressed the Government to proceed with caution, and looked to Parliament to reject it. The Prime Minister came forward with tact and skill, and delivered a long, lucid speech that led people to believe the Government would not proceed with the project, would go no further with it than sounding out Abyssinia's view — and then came negotiations that appear not to have been free of tension; and it was said that the Prime Minister grew impatient with them on certain days, and it was said, too, that he took the Minister of Public Works with him to the High Commissioner's residence, to discuss the matter there, or to hear what the Residency had to say of it. Then, in time, it emerged that

an agreement had been reached between Egypt and the American company obliging us to spend, from that moment, fifty thousand pounds. This agreement then proceeded on its way with a strange, astonishing speed; and it was said that the Under-Secretary of Finance, who had rejected the Jebel Aulia dam, did not approve this latest project either, and that the Council of Ministers passed it regardless. When it reached the Finance Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, the Minister of Public Works declared to that Committee, in a statement recorded in its minutes, that postponing this project would do no harm — and yet the project was passed by the Committee all the same, and came before the Chamber of Deputies, where certain members pressed for its postponement, and the Chamber refused them this postponement.

No sooner had the project come up for consideration yesterday than it appeared that certain men who harbor and display goodwill toward the Government were loath to see it passed, and pressed insistently for its rejection now; the debate dragged on, the argument grew heated, and certain deputies displayed the oratorical skill and rhetorical mastery they habitually display on such occasions — skill and mastery that grant us, these days, a certain leadership in the art of speech.

For some reason, the Speaker wished to adjourn the session — most likely because he was tired, and had some regard for his own comfort and that of his colleagues; for the speakers who wished to charge forth and range about, to display their various gifts of rhetorical brilliance, were many. The Speaker saw no harm in postponing them to the next day; and it is most likely that the Speaker of the Chamber had come to relish this eloquence, and wished it to run on — and what harm is there in a man of letters relishing an artistic pleasure, begrudging its being cut short or brought to an end, wishing it to extend and to run on? Nor was the Speaker of the Chamber the only one to relish this eloquence and wish it to run on; his colleagues, too, shared with him this exalted pleasure, and asked for more of it! Nor was the Speaker of the Chamber the only one to fear, for his own sake, an excess of eloquence, should the speakers' oratory continue unbroken; his colleagues, too, felt their own insides filling with this rich discourse, and feared an attack of indigestion upon themselves — and so the Speaker did not propose adjourning the session until the deputies were satisfied. But the ministers are gluttonous folk: they are never sated, and no fear of surfeit or indigestion in eloquence troubles them; like their brethren, they relished the discourse, but had not yet had their fill of it — and so, when they sensed the table being

cleared and the tablecloth being folded away, they were vexed, and found it hard to bear, and said: this is a grievous day indeed, and what day could be more grievous than one on which the morsel is snatched from the hungry man's mouth, and sweet water withheld from the parched man's lips!!

There the contest grew fierce between the sated and the hungry, and the struggle dragged on between the slaked and the parched; and from the ministers there issued a spark of electricity that had scarcely passed beyond them before it reached the ranks nearest them, kindling a fire there and fanning a blaze — for the Chamber, it turned out, was not wholly sated, nor wholly hungry; rather, some imagined themselves sated, and others imagined themselves hungry. Or say, rather, that the ministers' hunger dispelled the deputies' satisfaction, so that they came to share in the hunger too. And here the disagreement appeared between the Speaker and the majority: the Speaker wished to leave, while the deputies wished to remain, out of courtesy to the ministers. When the matter dragged on for the Speaker, he left, and most of the deputies present went about their business. And the curious, droll thing was that the Speaker did not leave alone, but was accompanied in his departure by some of his supporters among the deputies. Yet this troubled the majority not at all; rather, they set the Deputy Speaker in the Speaker's place, elected a temporary secretary in place of the permanent one, certain speakers delivered speeches, the acting Prime Minister spoke on the Cabinet's behalf, and the Chamber then adjourned to settle the matter that evening.

This is one interpretation; but there is another interpretation of the ministers' conduct, one people have also arrived at concerning this conduct of theirs — and it was, indeed, a strange one, hard to grasp.

A certain group of people alleged that the ministers were not hungry for the speakers' oratory at all, but were, rather, brimming over with a surplus of energy they wished to expend, a remainder of vigor they wished to spend, a downpour of words they wished to unleash. These people say that the acting Prime Minister had prepared a long, expansive, weighty statement, which he had held in patient reserve the day before yesterday, and could no longer contain by yesterday, so that he had no choice but to deliver it, that he might find calm and pass a restful night. The Speaker's adjournment of the Chamber was, in this view, injurious to him, for it threatened to force him to hold on to this long, expansive, weighty statement for yet another day — and you well know that nothing

is harder to bear, nothing more agonizing, than words one wishes to speak and yet finds oneself compelled to keep pent up and unspoken.

Whatever the case, a new phenomenon occurred in the Chamber of Deputies yesterday: the ministers and a group of deputies rose up against the Speaker and his office, and the ministers and the majority of deputies departed from the tradition that holds a session adjourned once the Speaker adjourns it, unless he leaves with an apology and sets the Deputy Speaker in his place. This uprising carries its own danger, for in it lies a certain contempt for the office of the Speaker, and a certain domination by the Cabinet — not merely over the Speaker's own affairs, but over his affairs together with those of a group of deputies who had wished to speak; for when the Speaker left, they left with him, and refused to return, declining to take their share in what amounted to an affront to the office of the Speaker. And from all this arose a situation in which the Speaker's position has become truly awkward: for if he submits, he introduces into parliamentary life a dangerous precedent; and if he refuses to submit, he stirs up a fierce dispute between himself and the ministers — and everything suggests that the majority will support the Cabinet today just as it supported it yesterday. The Speaker will thus be compelled either to submit, thereby harming parliamentary life, or to resign the Speakership. It is most likely that discussions and meetings have already taken place, and that the parliamentary atmosphere will clear entirely by this evening — but none of this will alter the fact that a real event did take place yesterday: namely, that the Chamber of Deputies convened by the ministers' will, against the Speaker's will, and that a group of deputies wished to support the Speaker and defend their views on one of these grave and consequential projects.

This may seem strange, this may seem an aberration — but Egypt has grown so accustomed to everything that nothing in her remains strange, nothing an aberration.

There is, however, a matter graver in danger than all this, and further-reaching in its consequence: namely, that the English had been claiming the present Cabinet to be headless, following Sidqi Pasha's illness and his departure for Paris, or for Versailles — yet it has now become clear that this present Cabinet possesses not one head, but several. And what stronger proof of this than what happened yesterday, when it assembled the Chamber of Deputies against the will of the Speaker of the Chamber and no small number of its members? Can it truly be said that this Cabinet, capable of such feats, of such

extraordinary exertions, is headless??

Said my companion: 'You are, indeed, a simple soul with a good heart. Since when have the ministers ever needed effort or exertion to get from the majority of deputies whatever they please?'