

Moon

Kawkab al-Sharq, 19 April 1933

It is our Prime Minister — may God grant him complete recovery, and lavish upon him full health. He rose yesterday in the sky of the Chamber of Deputies, dazzling every eye, enchanting every mind, setting hearts pounding in every breast, and loosening the tongue of one honorable deputy into this charming popular phrase: 'The moon has risen.'

But the moon rises at the start of the month, rises in the middle of it, and rises at its end. And in its various risings it bears these different names, some of which bring joy and delight, some of which bring hope and expectation, and some of which stir in the soul a calm, pale feeling — with neither delight in it nor joy, neither hope in it nor expectation.

The crescent stirs hope in men's souls, for it will become, as Abu Tammam said, a full moon entire. And the full moon stirs delight, joy, and confidence in men's souls, for it presents the moon in its most beautiful, most radiant form, most enchanting to mind and eye alike.

As for the waning moon, it stirs nothing particular in men's souls — it is merely a calm feeling, seldom exceeding this general handsomeness. In which of these phases, then, did our Prime Minister's moon rise yesterday in the Chamber of Deputies? It was certainly no crescent! For he was a crescent long ago, back when he first formed the Cabinet and took up the burdens of government.

Nor was he, without doubt, a full moon — for he was a full moon long ago too, once matters had settled firmly in his hands, once the means of strength had gathered around him, so that he came to dominate Egypt unrivaled, unopposed, conducting his affairs exactly as he pleased, with a strong, resolute hand that knew no weakness, that no faintness could ever find its way to. He loosed his tongue in every kind of oratory — now on politics, now on economics; now in Arabic, now in French; now in Cairo, now in the provinces; indeed, now in Egypt, now in Europe.

He was, at that time, a full moon entire! Mighty in force, tough in temperament, iron-willed. And he was sound of body, brimming with vigor. But now his force has grown mild, his temperament has softened, his will has weakened. Affairs have scattered beyond his grasp, and he can no longer master them; matters have slipped from his control, and he

can no longer manage or direct them alone; illness has left its mark on him, so that he no longer speaks at length, but merely offers brief thanks; he no longer pays a visit and lingers, but merely calls and departs.

He was no crescent, and he was no full moon — he was, rather, a waning moon at the end of the month. And yet he was not merely a moon: he was fragrance and sweetness besides. His light shone in the Chamber of Deputies, a chamber choked, as one of the speakers put it, with the reek of onions!! This reek dispersed, and there lingered in the air a light, charming perfume, refreshing souls, reviving hopes, restoring peace to its rightful place between the two contending parties, between supporters and opponents.

This peace had, in fact, already been settled beforehand, at that conference held Friday morning, prepared for by private meetings and repeated interviews, and which concluded in two formulas, written, then read, then agreed that one would be recited by the Speaker and the other by the leader of the opposition. The agreement was carried out with an integrity beyond reproach, and its execution took on theatrical touches not without a certain beauty, not lacking in tact and grace.

In the first act of the story, the Chamber of Deputies assembles, its session opens, and it takes up its business as though nothing at all had happened — yet the observers in the gallery have no doubt that something has indeed happened, for certain seats stand empty that were never habitually empty, certain chairs await their occupants though it was never their custom to wait so long. If your eye wanders between the Chamber, proceeding, or seeming to proceed, with its business, and these empty chairs, you cannot doubt that something significant has taken place, and that something momentous is yet to come.

While you are still pondering what has happened and awaiting what will come, the opposition enters, their leader at their head; every eye fixes, every neck cranes; the opposition leader steps forward to the one who will offer the apology, and a conversation follows that no one overhears, though every man goes off in his own direction of guesswork and interpretation. Then the opposition leader returns to his seat, and the Speaker of the Chamber recites the formula that had been written — and there he is, apologizing, laying out his apology at length, affirming his love of freedom of opinion and freedom of speech. Then, once he has finished this formula, the leader of the offended party rises and recites the formula of reconciliation — and there he is, noting it for the record,

offering thanks, expressing good wishes! Then he sits, and the Chamber proceeds with its business as though nothing at all had happened, as though no dispute had ever occurred.

And you find yourself pondering the emotions that must have surged in the hearts of the offended and the apologetic, the emotions that must have stirred in the hearts of the opposition and its supporters, as they listened to the Speaker's apology and conciliation, the leader's thanks and satisfaction — you ponder these emotions, these storms, and your thinking arrives at nothing at all; you fix your gaze upon the faces, searching for emotion, for storm, and you find no emotion, no storm to be had. There is only a sweeping calm before the apology and the reconciliation, and a sweeping calm after the apology and the reconciliation. The atmosphere had been, as they say, thick with clouds, thunder crashing within it, lightning flashing within it — but you know that the air clears after the squall. And the squall came on Wednesday; the air began to clear on Thursday, cleared fully by Friday morning, and its clearing was complete thereafter, and the Chamber recovered its sweeping calm, its complete stillness, and there it was, discussing the Mortgage Credit Bank, and the onion law.

Then comes the second act, in which the moon rises, casting over the Chamber a calm, mild, soothing light — yet one that stirs energy, rousing resolve in any case. And there are the assembled men, standing in reverence for the moon; there they are, cheering in welcome of the moon; there they are, applauding in homage to the moon; and there, the most energetic and mightiest of them all, flying through the air, ascending into the sky, until he reaches the moon and kisses its palm!! And what strangeness is there in the moon having a palm, upon which the moon's admirer showers kisses and caresses?

Then the Speaker of the Chamber speaks, raising a greeting to the moon; and the moon speaks, returning the greeting to its admirers; then the moon sets, and hearts and souls follow after it, and hopes and wishes trail in its wake.

And everything returns to calm and tranquility, and the Chamber has escaped the quarrel of the contenders, the apology of the apologetic, the satisfaction of the satisfied. And the onion won its case, and plunged into the Ministry of Agriculture, examining its budget with the very same haste with which it had examined the Ministry of Public Works' budget on Wednesday evening!

So it goes with our affairs in Egypt: turmoil followed by calm, anger followed by reconciliation, a moon that rises and then sets, and observers in the gallery who watch and smile, who listen and laugh — until morning comes, and people pick up Al-Ahram, and look, and find that the real earnestness, all of it, is in London, and that Egypt's policy is being managed in the British Foreign Office.

Will the High Commissioner return, so that the moon remains shining in the sky? Or will the High Commissioner be transferred, so that one moon sets, and another rises in its place, appearing as a crescent — and God alone knows whether it will complete its cycle, or set again before it ever becomes a full moon!