

A Warning

Kawkab al-Sharq (Hadith al-Masa'), 9 April 1933

Few among men can turn away from today's discourse to yesterday's. And fewer still among men can look upon today's events and discern in them tomorrow's, for the present happenings that surround us occupy us wholly, to the exclusion of both past and future, and hem in our deeds, our hopes, and our thoughts, so that we ourselves become as transient as they are in all we do and say. Had it been given to many men to reflect upon yesterday, they would have taken it as a lesson, and would have spared themselves much harm. And had it been given to many men to discern what today's events will disclose tomorrow, they would have turned away from many an undertaking, and would have spared themselves many a pain and untold varieties of disappointment...

This is a thing we say always, yet we take no heed of it, nor draw any lesson from it, as though it had been said so often that it has grown tiresome, as though we had repeated it so much that we have wearied of it, as one wearies of a tale retold. Yet not every tale retold deserves to be found tiresome and renounced; some tales retold may be told again and again without your ever exhausting the lesson within them, or taking in the wisdom they hold, or drawing the full profit from the moral they carry.

And it appears that ministers and men of power are, of all men, the most averse to yesterday, and the most disinclined toward tomorrow, and are for that reason the most exposed to error, and the most liable to fall into wrongdoing and sin. It is as though office—as the newspaper al-Sha'b pictured it a few days ago, in an admirable image—were an aged wine, which its drinker no sooner tastes than it makes him forget everything, effacing yesterday from his mind and casting a thick veil between him and tomorrow! Had our Prime Minister called to mind the perilous events of yesterday, whether near or far, he would have taken heed and drawn a lesson, and would have turned himself away from certain things, and restrained his resolve from certain things. For how many, before him, chafed at democracy, and made war upon it, and upon the freedom of peoples plotted against it, only to return laden with shameful defeat and humiliating rout, because democracy is too strong to be overpowered, and too tough of stock to be broken, for it is the very image of the people's will, and the manifestation of its strength; and it is

difficult, if not impossible, for any individual, however great his power may grow, and however high and lofty his station may reach, to subdue an entire people, or to humble it and prolong its humbling.

Had the Prime Minister thought upon tomorrow, he would have seen a hideous terror, a mighty horror, and would have measured his step before taking it, and weighed his course before acting; but office, being this same aged wine, has beguiled the Prime Minister, made him forget yesterday, turned him away from tomorrow, driven him to the deeds he has done, and entangled him in the wrong he has fallen into; and now he reaps the fruits of this forgetting of yesterday and this turning-away from tomorrow, and tastes them, and finds them green and bitter...!

He took up office believing in his own strength, proud of his own competence, confident in his own intelligence, assured of the breadth of his own resourcefulness, never doubting that he would obtain from this people whatever he desired; and he did not call to mind that other men, who had been, like him, mighty and mighty in standing, and had been, like him, intelligent, and had been, like him, brilliantly capable, had made war upon the people and had not obtained from it what they desired, but rather the people obtained from them what it desired. Nay, he does not call to mind that he himself has set his own strength, his own standing, his own intelligence, and his own competence to the task of warring against the people and plotting against it, charging and sallying, speaking and speaking at length, making the people taste every kind of tribulation and every hue of strife—and yet obtaining from it nothing at all; the matter ending, rather, with his submitting to what the people wanted, working beneath its banner, courting its leaders, and lavishing upon them flattery and overtures, until they turned away from him and grew weary of him.

The Prime Minister did not call this to mind, nor did he reflect upon it, and so he renewed, in his present term, what he had committed in his term of old. And I pledge to you that, should God grant him health and favour him with a tranquil life, he will see the people's triumph and its victory, he will see democracy's conquest and its ascendancy, and he will seek to enfold himself beneath its banner, and will spend lavishly from his ample resourcefulness and his splendid competence to draw near to the very leaders whom he now heaps with abuse, incitement, and provocation, and he will wish that they might embrace him with their favour; but office, being this same aged wine, has beguiled the Prime Minister, made him forget yesterday, turned him away from tomorrow,

and diverted him from today...!

Were the matter to stop at the disappointment and the bitter mortification the Prime Minister brings upon himself, it would be an easy thing to bear; for the Prime Minister is a man like other men, who must learn as other men learn, and must profit from the harsh lessons that time metes out to the sons of man. But the matter goes beyond the Prime Minister to his whole homeland, to his entire nation. The Prime Minister is free to do himself harm, and to expose himself to misfortune; but the Prime Minister does not possess—nor should he ever possess—the right to do harm to his nation, and to expose the whole of it to misfortune. Yet the Prime Minister exposes his nation to a danger beyond which there is no danger, and drives it toward a harm the like of which there is no harm. Had he now been granted, in this respite which illness forces upon him, the instrument of reflection and thought, and had he looked behind him, and looked about him, and cast his gaze a little way ahead, he would have realised with certainty that he has brought his nation to the brink of a bottomless abyss.

Never has a prime minister brought Egypt to the point to which Sidqi Pasha has brought her—to such distaste for the power of government, such a spoiling of the bond between the nation and those who govern it, such a filling of hearts with doubt and suspicion of the sincerity of those set over its affairs. And the Prime Minister is, in our judgment, too intelligent to believe his supporters when they claim to him that the people love him and are drawn to him! For never have the people turned away from a minister as the Egyptians turn away from Sidqi Pasha, nor have the people ever chafed at a minister as the Egyptians chafe at Sidqi Pasha.

And the Prime Minister knows full well that nothing is more perilous to the life of nations than that hatred should reign between the governors and the governed...

Nor has any prime minister ever brought Egypt to the point to which Sidqi Pasha has brought her in the wretchedness of her economic condition; and he knows more of this than we do, and perhaps he gauges it just as we gauge it. He is certain that in Egypt there are thousands upon thousands of people afflicted by hunger, stung by deprivation, tormented by the memory of the plenty they once knew, and terrified by the prospect of the misery that awaits them. And he knows, as we know, that this unbroken wretchedness, this all-encircling destitution, is the

gravest of all things for the stability of the social order, let alone the political order.

Nor has any prime minister ever been as powerless as Sidqi Pasha to establish order and secure stability, he himself furnishing, every single day, the conclusive evidence and the proofs that leave no room for doubt that he stands forever in need of the whole of the army, and the whole of the police, and the whole of guile, and the whole of cunning, merely to protect order and to guarantee this contrived and laboured calm...! And that without our even mentioning this power, hidden yet manifest, absent yet present, which they call the Occupation...!

And the Prime Minister knows, as we know, that nothing is more perilous to the life of nations than an order that rests upon pillars of straw, and which, but for the army, the police, cunning, and guile, would collapse within a single hour of the day...!

Powerless to bind the ties of affection between the ruler and the ruled; powerless to protect the people from poverty and hunger; powerless to establish order save by this extraordinary force to which recourse is had only in times of imminent peril.

This is the plight into which the Prime Minister has fallen, for office, being this same aged wine, has beguiled him, made him forget yesterday, and turned him away from tomorrow; and yet he remains in office, bent on forgetting yesterday and turning away from tomorrow. What, then, of these great catastrophes into which Egypt may be plunged, should this state of affairs continue, whether for a long time or a short...?

But the Prime Minister is not the only one who must call yesterday to mind, and think upon tomorrow, and reckon this danger that awaits his homeland; there are other men besides, who are perhaps most keenly anxious that Egypt should not be plunged into this bottomless abyss to the brink of which she has been brought, and who are perhaps anxious that Egypt should remain, as she was before, a land of security and order, of ease and prosperity. How fitting it would be for these men to hold themselves to what the Prime Minister is unwilling to attend to: let them call yesterday to mind, and think upon tomorrow...