

Anxiety

Kawkab al-Sharq, 30 April 1933

I do not know: is it mere unease that is toying with the mind of the Prime Minister and his colleagues, or is it something else — something greater than unease, more violent in its shaking of the spirit, its wrenching of hearts, its scattering of minds and wits? Nor do I know whether this unease, or this fright, or this distress, springs from a weakness in the ministers' nerves after wearisome events have pressed upon them and frightening news has come upon them one after another; or whether it springs from an accurate assessment of the ministry's position and its outrageous turmoil between despair and hope. But the one thing beyond doubt is that the ministry, in these days, is anxious to the point of despair, and that the ministers, in these days, do not smile at life, just as political life does not smile at them. Nor do they look to the near future with any confidence, just as the future does not smile at their approach or their entry into it; rather, it is closing its doors in their faces, little by little, and is on the verge of shutting them fast, so that not even a breath of air can pass through.

Al-Ahram made a mistake some days ago: it published a telegraphic dispatch that had been meant for the official communiqué, and it interpreted this dispatch according to what it knew of the facts of the matter, and according to what it hoped for in flights of fancy. No sooner had Al-Ahram brought out the dispatch and its interpretation than the ministers and the ministers-in-waiting alike fell into turmoil: the former were crushed by fear, the latter revived by hope! The former saw their homes greet them scowling and frowning, wrapped in a thick, gloomy sorrow. The latter saw the ministry's offices greet them joyful and merry, content and smiling at them — that sickly smile the ministry's offices always give to ministers when they first arrive to take up power, signalling by it many meanings, the clearest and plainest of which is a meaning no single minister ever grasps, though all ministers together ought to grasp it: that arriving in power is no guarantee of remaining in it forever, and that a smile for power is only a prelude that will be followed, in due course, by a scowl for resignation. But man is vain, and his vanity distracts him from his duty, and entangles him in much evil he could easily have been free of, had he only reckoned, on entering his office, that he entered it as a visitor, not a permanent resident.

The ministers fell into distress at Al-Ahram's report, and their chief was the most distressed of all: no sooner had the news reached him than he, who had been sluggish, grew light as though some weight had been lifted; he, who had been listless, grew brisk; and he hurried to the telephone and shook the very air between Cairo and London — a violent, electric shaking, well suited to the shocks Al-Ahram's report had set off within him! He roused our minister in London, and put him to work, to activity, to inquiry and agitation, to research and investigation. So our minister bestirred himself and grew agitated, our minister exerted himself and grew brisk, our minister researched and investigated — and then he returned to the telephone and shook the air once more between London and Cairo, a shaking with something of mockery in it, and something of sad despair.

Our Prime Minister then spoke to the press afterward, to calm the people and reassure his supporters: Al-Sha'b published his remarks with a fearful, anxious air, while Al-Ahram published them defiant and combative. And the people sensed Al-Sha'b's anxiety, and tasted Al-Ahram's defiance. So the fearful pressed on in their fear, and the hopeful pressed on in their hope. It seems the ministers could not master themselves, could not keep their hearts steady in their chests, and so they questioned their chief when they met with him on Thursday; and their chief spoke to them, in this meeting — as Al-Ahram tells us this very morning — words that perhaps eased their alarm somewhat, and lifted their spirits a little. But scarcely had one night passed and one day dawned when telegraphic reports reached the papers generally, of the Morning Post's advice to the Prime Minister, urging him insistently to rest! And so the fear of the fearful grew fiercer, and the hope of the hopeful grew greater, and there was no longer any avoiding the broadcasting of the conversation that had passed between the ministers and their chief at Thursday's meeting — in hopes that it might ease the anguish of the tormented among his supporters, and cast some gloom upon the hopes of those who hope for power, and those anxiously longing for office.

But we can assure those who broadcast this conversation in Al-Ahram, or who prompted its broadcast, that it eased no anguish, calmed no alarm, and cast neither gloom nor frown upon the hopes of the hopeful; for this conversation, as Al-Ahram published it, is nothing so much as those excuses offered to the hungry man to bear his hunger, to the thirsty man to endure his thirst, to the frightened man to feel some

measure of security — excuses that, in any case, neither feed the hungry, nor quench the thirsty, nor reassure the terrified and frightened.

The Prime Minister claimed to his colleagues that the news our minister in London had reported to him indicated that the High Commissioner was returning to Egypt, to remain there and not be transferred elsewhere. And it stands to reason that no sooner had this news settled in the ministers' hearts than their faces brightened, and comforting sighs rose from their breasts; but they did not consider that the High Commissioner's remaining — if true — does not entail the ministry's remaining, for the friendship of High Commissioners, in politics, is neither fixed nor to be relied upon. Nor did they consider that a change in the aides working with the High Commissioner in Cairo must signify something — and it is very likely that this something is not what the ministers would wish, nor something the ministers can bear even to contemplate.

And the Prime Minister claimed to his colleagues that the Anglo-Egyptian Committee had failed in what it had wanted to press the British government toward — namely, a change in British policy in Egypt, and a redirection of this policy toward changing the present regime — because it had not achieved the justice and fairness expected of it, nor won the backing of the Egyptian majority, or its sympathy.

But the Prime Minister and his colleagues did not consider that Al-Ahram would publish these very words for its readers, and would add to them a witty comment, an amusing gloss: namely, that the Committee had formed a delegation from among its members to meet the British Foreign Secretary and lay before him its view on Egyptian affairs, and that this delegation had not yet met the Foreign Secretary. And the meaning of that, to the sharp-witted and the dull-witted alike, is that it is premature and hasty to say that this Committee has failed; one can only say so after the meeting between the delegation and the Minister has taken place, and the result of that meeting has become known.

Nor did the Prime Minister and his colleagues reckon that Al-Ahram would add to this witty comment another, no less witty: namely, that the High Commissioner himself had not yet succeeded in meeting the Foreign Secretary. And the meaning of that is that any forecast of the success of one political plan over another is premature, as they say. And the meaning of that is that the spectre of fear must remain standing before the ministry and its supporters, and that the face of hope must

remain shining before the ministers-in-waiting.

As for the negotiations and the talks, the agreement and the treaty — Al-Ahram insisted on addressing them of its own accord, purely for God's sake. It informed us that the British government had, at the start of the winter, authorized talks between the Prime Minister and the High Commissioner's residence, so that once these reached a favourable outcome, formal negotiations would begin; and that these talks had in fact already begun, but that the crisis which struck the ministry after the Badari affair made it impossible to continue with them.

And the upshot of all this brings neither pleasure nor satisfaction, nor does it match what Egyptians would like to feel about themselves — namely, that they command their own respect. News arrives from England, and hearts leap at it, spirits rejoice at it, and these people and those differ over what explanation and interpretation to give it. The former fear for what is in their hands; the latter aspire to what is not in their hands. The former look to the English for aid; the latter seek hope from the English. Both play at cards, and Egypt is the stake of their game, and the shares of their winnings come from regarding Egypt as a means, not an end — as a prop, no more and no less.

This is nothing to take pleasure in; this does nothing to make Egyptians feel their own dignity and honour; this brings the day no nearer when Egyptians will attain true independence.

Those who fear have far more reason to fear for Egypt's sake; those who hope have far more reason to hope for Egypt's good. Those and these alike have far more reason to rely on Egypt alone, and to spend whatever effort they spend in enabling dear, noble Egypt to win her rightful due from the usurping English. And this unease that toys with the spirits of the despairing and the covetous alike has far more reason to be an unease over Egypt's welfare and independence, than over clinging to power and leaping toward it.