

Embarrassment . . .

Al-Wadi, 4 August 1934

The Ministry of the Interior is in an embarrassing position, but the embarrassment it finds itself forced into, and constrained by, stirs no pity for it in people's hearts, nor sympathy for it; rather, it stirs in people's hearts sympathy for Egypt, and pity for Egypt, and grief over this glorious country, that its reputation should suffer among nations, and that people should make it a subject for idle talk, mockery, and derision.

The Ministry of the Interior is in an embarrassing position, but this embarrassment it finds itself forced into is laughable, and precisely for this reason it is genuinely sorrowful: it makes us laugh when we look at it and witness its manifestations and its consequences, and it grieves us when we think about it and weigh its impact on the souls of foreigners, and on foreigners' judgment of Egyptians' lives. One of the Egyptians wanted to travel between Egyptian cities, and people's opinion of this man diverges in the outward appearance of the matter, though it agrees in the reality of the matter. The Egyptian people see him as a leader for Egypt, and declare him a leader for Egypt, loving him as peoples love their leaders, receiving him as peoples receive their leaders, and ransoming him with their own lives as peoples ransom their leaders. The Egyptian Ministry, and the Interior Ministry in particular, believes, when alone with itself, and with its friends, its supporters, its allies, its advisers, and the English, that this man is indeed a leader for Egypt — yet curses itself if it should say to the people that this man is nothing, merely an individual like any other individual. And the contradiction between belief and speech, between conviction and action, is an endless source of laughter — and it was from here that the Interior Ministry became embarrassed, and its embarrassment was genuinely laughable. And how could one not laugh, hearing from the Interior Ministry, and from the whole Ministry, that Mustafa al-Nahhas is a man no one loves, no one supports, and no one pays any attention to,

and then seeing the Interior Ministry mustering, for this man no one loves, no one supports, and no one pays attention to, the state's soldiers, the state's police, and the state's weapons, and preparing for him everything the state possesses of skill and cunning, of cleverness and stratagem, of guile and deception? If this man is frightening because the people love him, take to him, support him, and champion him, then let the

Interior Ministry say so, and declare that a continuous revolution exists in Egypt which the government has proven incapable of suppressing for four years now. And let it take whatever measures the revolution demands — proclaiming martial law, suspending the customary laws, and seizing people by open force and outright violence, continuously, without hesitation or wavering — and let people see whether the government would triumph over the people, and thereby find relief from Mustafa al-Nahhas, or whether the people would triumph over the Ministry, and thereby find relief from it, and it from them. But if Mustafa al-Nahhas, this man, is in truth an ordinary man, of no danger, carrying no weight over people's spirits, inspiring no fear whether he moves or stays still, whether he travels or settles — then let the Ministry calm down and be reassured, let the state's soldiers stay in their barracks, the state's police at their posts, the state's weapons in their storehouses, and let it spare itself the trouble of Mustafa al-Nahhas, and spare Mustafa al-Nahhas the trouble of itself.

But this Ministry fears this man, and declares that it feels secure from him; it is alarmed by this man, and declares that it pays him no attention; it mobilizes the full force of the state to make war on this man, and declares that it is not concerned with him. And so it is people's right to laugh, and people's right to laugh at length, and then people's right to grieve, and to grieve at length — for ministries were not established for jest, nor created for play, but were founded for the pure, undiluted seriousness of conducting affairs.

Leave aside all these events that took place in Port Said, Ismailia, and Zagazig, and leave aside this farce that recurs every Friday when Mustafa al-Nahhas goes to perform prayer at some mosque — leave all of this aside, for everyone sees it, laughs at it, and grieves over it. Let us pause instead on a very minor incident, one that occurred in Port Said, and you will find it more eloquent than anything else in depicting the notorious embarrassment our brilliant Interior Minister, Qaisi Pasha, is driven into. This weak man, whom no one pays attention to, whom no one holds in awe, to whom the government gives not the slightest concern — I forget his name, I believe it is Mustafa al-Nahhas — wanted to visit three of the wounded who were being treated, and were still being treated, in the Port Said hospital. And these wounded men had not fallen in any clash between the police and the people, for there had never once been a clash between the police and the people; rather, they had fallen by decree of fate — a wall had collapsed on them, or some stones had fallen

upon them, the kind that sometimes fall from the sky. And so they were taken to the hospital, and this man wanted to visit them, to console them and show them sympathy, and I do not know why the Ministry so hated this visit, and refused it to this man — yet this man insisted on what he wanted, and was determined to complete his visit whatever the circumstances, which is strange indeed for a man no one pays attention to, and to whom the Ministry attaches no importance. Stranger still is that this powerful, formidable Ministry could not manage to prevent him from the visit, even though it hated it with the utmost loathing and refused it with the utmost refusal, and even though it had erected barbed-wire fences around the hospital, and stationed

vast cordons of armed troops and police around the hospital as well — and any part of this would have sufficed to prevent this man, who poses no danger, from reaching the hospital. Yet the Ministry, despite all this, yielded to what he wanted, and cleared the way between him and the hospital, until he finally reached it — and there the Ministry achieved, through cunning and stratagem, what it had failed to achieve through violence and force. There, the hospital staff told Mustafa al-Nahhas that the wounded had already been moved to an unknown location, and the deputy governor confirmed, in the presence of state officers, what these staff had said, and Mustafa al-Nahhas withdrew from the hospital, believing the wounded had indeed been moved from it. But there is something stranger still than this weak man's insistence on visiting the hospital despite his weakness, and the powerful Ministry's submission to this man's will despite its power — namely, that the staff appear not to have been honest when they claimed to this weak man that the wounded had been moved, and that the deputy governor appears to have confirmed a falsehood when he confirmed to this weak man what the staff had said. For it may well be that the wounded had not been moved at all, had not left the hospital, and that this was said to the head of the delegation only in order to keep him from entering the hospital.

We would like to know the judgment of ethics on this position the Ministry took, when it claimed that the sick had been transferred from the hospital, even though they had not been transferred from it, but had been, and still were, inside it.

We would also like to know the judgment of religion, and the opinion of His Eminence, our great master the Sheikh of Al-Azhar Mosque, on a ministry that declares that the wounded have been transferred from a hospital when they had been, and still were, inside it. And we would like

to know the political meaning of this curious position: does it indicate security and confidence, or does it indicate fear and doubt? Then, after all this, we would like to know the significance of this position from the standpoint of general policy: does it indicate that the Ministry is so embarrassed that this embarrassment forces it to proclaim what is untrue, or does it indicate that the Ministry is so reassured that it has no need to alter the truth in the slightest, nor to claim that the wounded had been transferred from the hospital when they had been, and still were, inside it?

And finally, we would like to know what example the Ministry is setting for the people — for governments, in principle, ought to offer people a righteous model and a good example, and set before them the most useful examples of honesty, sincere counsel, sincerity, and the preference of good. So what does the Ministry think of its own position here? And what does the Ministry think of the people, should they imitate it — concealing the sick and the wounded, covering up what ought not to be covered up, twisting the truth over taxes, hiding the true extent of what they own, and denying the existence of their sons when they are called up for military service? Would we compel them to answer for that, or reward them for it? For if we blame them, and they tell us that people follow the religion of their own ministry, how would we answer? And if we reward them, then morality would be angered, religion would be angered, the law would be angered, and the interests of the state would be angered — so how would matters stand?

Have you seen anything more eloquent in depicting embarrassment than this minor incident the Ministry has been caught up in these past days — and all of it because Mustafa al-Nahhas is supposedly a weak man no one cares about, no one fears, and the Ministry attaches no importance to?

Have the ministers not had enough of this farce? Have the English not grown weary of this mischief? Is it not time for Egyptians to witness seriousness, after they have spent four years in laughter and jesting . . . ?

Taha Hussein

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