

Journeys...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), August 3, 1934

Why did the Prime Minister, and a number of his colleagues, journey to Alexandria, and on to Mersa Matruh, and the stretch of coast beyond it? People are asking about this journey, because they know full well that their cabinet is level-headed, firm, wise, and prudent — that it never does anything without reason, and never undertakes any course of action except that some wisdom, evident or hidden, has driven it there. And so they seek out the wisdom behind this journey, whose intention was announced so suddenly, and for which the cabinet's own schedule was rearranged — or so some newspapers report — for the cabinet had meant to meet on Wednesday and again on Thursday, but once the idea of this journey descended from the sky, or sprang up from the earth, or appeared upon the foam of the sea, the cabinet met twice in a single day, on Wednesday, so that the good man and his companions might set out on Thursday — as though they could not possibly have set out on Friday instead — sparing themselves the trouble of meeting twice in one blazing summer day, and sparing the public the trouble of gossip and rumor, of inquiry and speculation about comings and goings.

And when we further note that the good man, together with the Minister of War, the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Communications, journeyed all the way to the border between us and Italy, people can hardly be blamed for asking rather more, and rather more urgently, about this journey. And when we note, further still, that the British High Commissioner had himself journeyed to Mersa Matruh — by air or by land, I cannot say — and had stayed there some days, and that no sooner had he returned than the Prime Minister, the Minister of War, the Minister of Finance, and the Minister of Roads all hastened there in turn, some rocking on the waves of the sea, others flying through the sky — it was only natural that people should ask: what is the purpose of all this coming and going? What is the purpose of all this movement toward the border? Is there some fear that it might be breached? Some anxiety that it might not hold, on some future day, against those who would attempt to breach it? Is there some military operation in the works, requiring the competence of the Minister of War, the generosity of the Minister of Finance, the expertise of the Minister of Roads, and finally the courage of the good man who bears the responsibility for all these undertakings? And who proposed these undertakings in the first place —

the ministers and their own technical staff, or the High Commissioner and his? And if the High Commissioner's journey to the western border was followed by the ministers' own journey to that same border, then the High Commissioner has also journeyed to the eastern border — will the ministers journey there too? Is it not the people's right to learn the truth behind this commotion between east and west, and the secrets of these travels by land, sea, and air? Indeed it is.

But the cabinet's friends and supporters, and the newspapers that back it and toe its line, speak with easy confidence: the summer heat is fierce, they say, the season punishing, the work heavy, the exertion exhausting, and it is only the ministers' right to rest, to take their ease, and to seek out relaxation and diversion wherever they may find them — now on land, now in the sky, now upon this restless liquid plain that Homer once used to describe the sea.

So then, our ministers are not journeying for work after all, but for rest and recreation. We should like to establish the truth of the matter for a very simple reason: if the ministers' journey is undertaken for some affair of state, then it is the people's right to know what that affair is, so that they might understand what is intended for them. And if it is undertaken for recreation and rest, then it is the people's right to ask: at whose expense do the ministers seek this recreation and this rest? At whose expense is this yacht's fuel spent, coming and going? At whose expense is this airplane, or these airplanes, spent, coming and going? At the expense of the state, or at the expense of the ministers themselves?

Be that as it may, this sudden journey remains obscure in every respect, and we would welcome even a little light shed upon it.

There is, however, another journey with no obscurity about it, no ambiguity, no crookedness, no twist. It is the journey of the Wafd leader and his companions, by land and sea, not to the eastern border nor to the western border, but to one region of Egypt among others — to Port Said, and then to Sharqiya. This second journey was not paid for by the state, but by its own participants, and it raises in people's minds no need for inquiry or investigation, for it is plain in every particular. One party journeys for work, or for rest, and the state prepares everything for them; another party journeys to meet the sons of their own homeland, to speak with them about the affairs of that homeland, and to remind them — though they will never forget — of the rights owed to that homeland, and the state scatters obstacles in their path and conjures up difficulties

before them, turns the very places they visit into battlefields and arenas of combat, proclaims martial law, without legal basis, in the places they visit, and casts nets and snares in the places they visit, hunting people down to fling them into the depths of prison, so that by journey's end it is as though they had committed some crime — though no verdict of any kind has been passed against them — and then unleashes its sticks and its whips and its rifles upon the unarmed and the peaceable, leaving among them dead in Port Said, dead in Ismailia, dead in Zagazig. Is it not strange that people should observe, within a single week, such an enormous gulf between the journey of the Wafd leader and his companions within Egypt, and the journey of the Prime Minister and his companions to the border?

And before that, people had already observed the High Commissioner's journey to al-Sabria, and the state's solicitude for it, the state's careful provision for it. How, then, can people be expected to make sense of all this, to interpret it? For Egyptians to move about within their own country, and to visit one another, is apparently something forbidden, or at least something detested, which the state does not scruple to resist, even at the cost of exposing security, order, life, and blood to danger — to grave danger. But for ministers to journey for their own amusement, or for some obscure and dubious business, the state prepares everything, spends freely, and lavishes the utmost care upon it. And for the High Commissioner to journey through the interior of Egypt, defying Egyptian sentiment, and to share in that defiance alongside one of the ministers, against the wishes — or at least the discomfort — of his own colleagues, the state likewise prepares everything, spends freely, and receives him with the very grandest of welcomes. Can Egyptians, after all this, still believe themselves free? Can they still credit that they are independent? Were they truly free, the state would never have favored the ministers over them; it would never have furnished the ministers with every variety of amusement they might desire, nor forbidden their own leaders every variety of earnest purpose they might pursue. Were they truly independent, the state would never have favored the High Commissioner over them, smoothing the ground before him, consenting that crowds be mustered for him, while forbidding their own leaders to meet with Egyptians at all, scattering the crowds of Egyptians away from their own leaders with sticks and whips, and sometimes with gunfire, and consenting that an Englishman should, in the course of it all, tear down one of Egypt's own flags, on Egyptian soil, before the eyes of the Egyptian people.

Let the Egyptians reflect on this, and reflect on it at length — for it may well be their right, indeed their very duty, to know: are they free in their own country, or are they slaves?