

The Beauty Queen

Al-Risala, 1 March 1933

There is a smile that hesitates a long while before it forms upon certain lips and lights up certain faces; or say, rather, that there are lips and faces that hesitate a long while before they consent to let certain smiles form upon them and light them up; or say that there are souls that hesitate a long while before they let their lips and faces serve as the outward sign of whatever it is that a smile expresses, in certain circumstances. I found myself thinking about this hesitant smile, and about these lips, faces, and souls that hesitate between contentment and displeasure, and between whatever betrays and signals the two—smiling and frowning—when I read in the newspapers the news of the Beauty Queen and her gracing of Egypt with a happy and successful visit.

I thought about this hesitant smile because I felt it hesitating upon my own lips: I saw them try to relax, then draw back, then part and relax again into a smile, until this smile, which had been hesitant, finally settled upon them—but settled as a smirk, and, if not sharply bitter, then at least entirely without the sweetness of contentment. For I do not know whether humanity did well when it opened for itself this charming, absurd door, through which so much charm enters, and through which so much absurdity enters as well. And who knows—perhaps charm and absurdity are two friends who never part, two allies who will never quarrel, until the earth itself, and all who and what dwell upon it, are transformed. And this charming, absurd door, which stirs both contentment and displeasure, which vexes and amuses at once, is the door of the competition to win the sceptre of beauty!

This notion occurred to a French writer—not a man given to profound seriousness, nor one worn down by frivolity, but a light and charming writer, who is easily pleased and pleases people easily, and whose stock trades without difficulty among them. It seems most likely that he mocks people, and mocks himself as well; and it seems most likely, too, that he pleases people and delights them precisely because he mocks them—he ridicules them, and makes them believe he is being perfectly serious when he serves up his little pieces to them, when in fact he does nothing more than jest, most keenly and most gracefully. And perhaps he does all this—jesting in earnest and being earnest in jest—because he is a journalist; or, one might say, perhaps he became a

popular journalist with a thriving readership precisely because he does all this. I offer my apologies to journalists, but I believe that Her Majesty the Press has built her mighty throne upon these very solid and sturdy pillars of managing the public. And the crowds, under the shadow of democracy, are best and most effectively managed when you clothe yourself in the garment of seriousness while jesting, and dress yourself in the robe of jest while being serious, and show them, in every case, of yourself, whatever you wish to show, not whatever you ought to show.

This urbane French writer, who threw wide open for humanity the gate of beauty, and stirred in empty heads the idea of a contest for the crown of loveliness, is (Maurice de Waleffe). This notion occurred to him one day while joking, or one night while amusing himself, and he mentioned it to a friend or two, then to a colleague or two, then to the editorial staff of his journal. The morning had not yet dawned before the idea had filled Paris; the evening had not yet fallen before it had filled France; the next day had not yet come before it had filled Europe; and only a few days passed before it had filled the whole earth, and taken hold of everyone's head.

And here is another of the material sources of the power of Her Majesty the Press: that she sees an opinion, and lo, it stands before all people, or before vast multitudes of them, at one and the same moment, or at closely successive moments, surrounded by every allurements, every temptation, every incitement to interest; so that people meet one another, having read the newspaper, and find themselves asking: "And what do you think of this curious and charming idea?"—Maurice de Waleffe's idea for this competition, to which young women would be invited to display whatever consummate beauty and enchanting loveliness they possessed. Then the echoes of the invitation return, from Paris, from France, from Europe, from the ends of the earth, back to the journal; and lo, the idea has worth; and lo, the first trial is prepared and then carried out; and lo, beauty has a queen in France; and lo, other countries follow France's course; and lo, every country has its own beauty queen; and lo, the competition becomes a European one among these national Majesties; and lo, Europe has a queen, and then the whole world has a queen. And lo, a new order has been established; and lo, extreme democracy, and doctrinaire socialism, and moderate aristocracy, and excessive autocracy... all these various and mutually distant systems have agreed to submit to the sovereignty of beauty.

But the sovereignty of beauty—though it has borrowed the titles of monarchy, and surrounded itself with every hue of power and every manner of splendour—is weak, frail, feeble, and short-lived, just like beauty itself. It is a monarchy, yet more closely resembles a republic—and what manner of republic? It resembles the ancient republics, the republics of Greece and Rome, in which sovereignty never remained with its holder for more than a single year. It is a monarchy, yet it is not inherited, but won by election—and what manner of election!! A narrow, limited election, often affected by political motives and circumstances—so that the crown of beauty ought, in fairness, to be shared among the nations, passed in turn from one to another: France wins it, then hands it on to Belgium, and Belgium hands it on to Holland, and so it goes, until every nation has its own share of this innocent, worldwide sovereignty.

Innocent? A matter open to question! It is, indeed, an innocent sovereignty as far as nations, regions, cities, and villages are concerned; but its innocence is, in many respects, exposed to doubt and danger. For this transient, swiftly fading monarchy toys with the heads of the queens themselves, and of their families; and it is in the nature of monarchy to toy with people's heads, unless it rests upon a sound and solid constitution—and the monarchy of beauty has no constitution at all. Nor does the monarchy of beauty toy only with the heads of the queens; it toys, too, with the heads of a great many of its subjects—young men and old, proprietors of theatres, dance halls, and cinemas. And, moreover, the monarchy of beauty is quite eloquent in this toying: it sets the pens of writers racing across the newspapers, sets the tongues of ladies loose in the salons, and adds, in all this, to the general dizziness and confusion of minds. And so, no sooner does a queen ascend the throne of beauty than her fate, once she is deposed—God forgive me, once she retires—becomes a matter of considerable doubt; and it seems most likely, indeed, that she is destined for some house of amusement, or some dance club, or some cinema house, or for all of these together. The monarchy of beauty is, then, in need of a constitution, to guarantee the queen that her ascent to the throne shall not become a means to her own degradation.

There is, however, another aspect of this toying with minds practised by the monarchy of beauty that deserves notice: beauty queens generally come to believe in their own monarchy, and to be convinced that they are truly queens; and the crowds, too, often come to believe in

this monarchy on their behalf, so that jest turns to earnest, and play becomes an undoubted reality. And out of this sudden earnestness, and this scheduled, supplementary reality—which Einstein has not yet thought to consider—there arises a particular flavour of life, one that gives rise to these hesitant smiles I spoke of at the beginning of this piece.

Consider the Beauty Queen who has graced Egypt with her visit these past few days. No sooner had she resolved upon this visit than the news of it outran her, and we thrilled to it, and felt something of a boundless delight; and Her Majesty the Press graciously did her duty toward her fellow Majesty, announcing the visit and spreading word of it as was fitting. Then the Beauty Queen arrived, and Her Beautiful Majesty had no choice but to take tea with Her Eloquent and Articulate Majesty, and the house of al-Jihad became the meeting place of the two queens, at the table of my friend Tawfiq Diyab. And the two queens—the Queen of Beauty and the Queen of Speech—graciously bestowed a costly measure of favour upon a devoted, fascinated group of their subjects, and I was among those touched by this favour. But another queen—a heavy, hateful one—extends her wicked dominion over people in winter: namely, Her Hateful Majesty Influenza; and she it was who stood between me and my enjoyment of this exalted favour from Her Beautiful Majesty and Her Eloquent Majesty. And how sorry I was—how very sorry indeed!

The Beauty Queen is as charming as she ought to be: no sooner had she arrived in Egypt than she discharged a series of duties imposed upon her by the majesty of monarchy and the graciousness of beauty. She registered her name at her lofty royal palace, then, secondly, paid a visit to the Prime Minister. Having finished with the executive power, she graciously turned to the legislative power, and paid a visit to Parliament, where the representatives of the nation discharged their duty before Her Majesty in the finest possible manner.

No sooner had Her Majesty finished with official Egypt than she graciously turned her thoughts to the Egypt of the opposition—for monarchy stands above party—and graciously paid a visit to His Excellency the Chairman of the Egyptian Wafd. Then she turned her thoughts to the Egypt that does not concern itself with politics, but rather with social and economic reform, and graciously paid a visit to Her Ladyship the President of the Women's Union, and visited the Union's headquarters, where she witnessed a performance, and visited the houses of industry and commerce—discharging, throughout these visits,

each one's due, with all the beauty, charm, refinement, grace, and lightness of spirit that are her very nature.

And now, since another official Majesty is gracing Egypt—namely, His Italian Majesty—the discourse on beauty must give way to the discourse of politics. And this newspaper has nothing whatsoever to do with politics; let it suffice, then, to welcome, sincerely and wholeheartedly, Their Italian Majesties, and then return to the Beauty Queen, wishing her every success after her reign, as she was successful during it, and, finally, turn to the esteemed reader, whom we advise to read a splendid play composed by the two French authors Georges Berr and Louis Verneuil, whose subject is a beauty queen, and whose title is Miss France; for the reader will find in this play, in every respect, earnestness and jest, humour and candour, and a powerful pleasure besides.