

Persuasion . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 5 June 1934

The Prime Minister imagined he would be roasted in fierce flame in the Chamber of Deputies when he faced the interpellation over the crisis of the Mixed Courts. So he took his precautions, made ready his defenses, guarded against the blaze, and contrived every shade of caution he could contrive, so that the fire would not touch him, nor touch his ministry — or so that, if any flame or scorching gust from it did touch him or his ministry, it would do no harm.

People said that he had gone to Alexandria before this interpellation came up for consideration precisely for this reason: he stayed there for as many days as he stayed, met whom he met, and spoke there to whomever he spoke, so as to lay in a store from its sweet air and its gentle breeze, and from its nearness to the sea — a reserve that would help him face this fierce fire and turn it, for him, into coolness and safety.

Then people said that he visited the High Commissioner's residence on Sunday morning, to offer congratulations on the feast day of His Britannic Majesty, and spoke on certain matters of policy, among them, most likely, the crisis of the Mixed Courts and its interpellation — adding, from this conversation, one more reserve to his reserves, one more precaution to his precautions. And yesterday he went to the Chamber of Deputies with a tranquil heart, an untroubled mind, and an easy conscience, confident that he would plunge into the fire and emerge from it as he had entered it, unharmed and unscathed, touched by no injury and no ill. For he had recited his incantations, and taken up such charms as would shield him from the fire and render him proof against burning. Then he plunged into the fire and emerged from it, smiling, his features relaxed. Then he looked at this fire with the glance of one confident and assured, and poured upon it, as they say, a cold “shower”! And behold, it shrank and shrank, and dwindled little by little, until it crept back into the burrow from which it had come out, and the Deputies dispersed toward midnight, asking themselves: were they awake, or were they asleep? Was what they had been through a dream, or was it real?

And in truth, however little I say, however long I speak, however much I embellish, however much I elaborate, I shall never do the Prime Minister justice, nor give him the praise and commendation he deserves. For yesterday he outdid himself, and outdid all Egyptian statesmen. He

showed that in Egypt's quiver there are arrows — or at least one arrow — and that in Egypt's scabbards there are swords, or at least one sword, and that Egypt can stand firm before events and misfortunes, and can meet foreigners in battle, confident of victory, or in peace, confident of superiority. For God has combined in the Prime Minister a warrior's flame and a man of judgment, one whom warriors would scarcely withstand, and whom debaters and disputants would scarcely withstand either!..

And the most important thing we notice in the Prime Minister's response to the interpellation yesterday is that he is a man who loves justice and hates oppression, and does not wish the Deputies to meddle in what does not concern them, or to expose themselves to what is none of their business. For the matter of the Mixed Courts is an international matter which the Deputies ought not to wade into, nor the Senators either; it is entrusted to the Ministry alone, reserved to it by the ruling of the Constitution. Whoever among the Deputies or Senators broaches it or wades into it is in violation of the Constitution and stands outside it — and the interpellators ought to thank the Prime Minister for having been gentle and indulgent with them, setting them back on the right path without violence, when he could, had he wished, have asked the Chamber to put them on trial for having violated the Constitution and for having tried to drag the Chamber with them into that violation.

And the meaning of this position, which the Prime Minister took yesterday, and had taken on other occasions before yesterday, is that there exists a censorship imposed upon Parliament, curbing its authority, clipping its wings, and stripping from its competence — as they say — matters which people used to believe it had the right to examine and to render judgment upon. And what people also know is that chambers of deputies in every country on earth debate foreign policy, and debate it broadly, extensively, and in detail, and that no minister of foreign affairs, and no head of any ministry, can deny them their right to this broad, detailed debate. And what people also know is that in every chamber of deputies there are committees, called foreign affairs committees, which watch foreign policy closely, hear ministers, question them, and contend with them on the floor of the chamber, and force them, in many instances, to fall from power. This is how it is in Europe. But in Egypt, the new constitutional jurisprudence does not permit the Chamber of Deputies to bring up the question of the Mixed Courts for debate, or to take any decision upon it — because it is an international matter, and its

handling belongs to the Ministry alone.

But there is a question we would like the Prime Minister to answer: what is his opinion of the Egyptian question — is it international, or is it not? Can the Deputies bring it up for debate, or can they not? And the question of the public debt — can the Chamber bring that up, or can it not? And if the Prime Minister forbids the Deputies to bring up Egyptian matters that touch on general or particular international policy, then what is left to the Chamber of its sovereignty, its authority, and its guardianship of independence?

And another matter, no less grave than this one, and no less serious, but one that invites a smile, and may well provoke laughter, is that the Prime Minister exerted a strenuous effort to establish that the crisis of the Mixed Courts arose entirely of its own accord, that no one stirred it up, and that no element from outside the Mixed Courts interfered in it. We should like to know, then, who accused the Ministry of being the one that stirred up the crisis and pushed the judges to think and to protest? And whom, exactly, was the Prime Minister answering — this is talk that was alluded to in certain newspapers and foreign circles. Did the Prime Minister rise yesterday to prove to the Deputies that the government is in earnest about securing Egypt's interest and protecting Egypt's right, or did he rise to prove to foreigners that the Ministry is innocent of what they accused it of — of having stirred up the crisis and incited the judges?

And which was dearer to the Prime Minister, and preferred by him: to reassure the Deputies, and to reassure the Egyptians, about Egypt's rights? Or to reassure the foreigners that no one entices them, incites against them, or stirs up crises for them? And more deserving still than either of these, of a smile and a laugh, is this charming little display which the Prime Minister presented to the foreigners from the very rostrum of the Chamber of Deputies. For the Prime Minister praised the foreigners, recalled their favor upon us, their kindness toward us, our gratitude to them, and our regard for their rights. What men! Words not tiresome to repeat — how often has this sort of talk been said, without ever profiting those who say it, or those who hear it, in the least. For the foreigners know, just as the Egyptians know, that the bond between them and us will never rest on speech, however sweet, nor on speeches, however enchanting. It can rest — and from now on can only rest — on honesty, sincerity, good faith, and mutual respect. But if we merely smile at one another, and praise one another, with the tips of our tongues and our lips, while our hearts hold misgiving, wariness, and ill opinion, and

our deeds hold cunning, deception, and the preference of advantage over what is right — then this is the evil beyond which there is no evil, and the affliction beside which no affliction compares.

The Prime Minister knows this full well, and knows that relations between us and the foreigners will never improve unless the Egyptian government learns how to build them on firmness, respect for what is right, and the recognition that Egypt, if it is not yet free in fact, is resolved to be free. Yet, in spite of this, he goes on saying and repeating what others before him have said and repeated.

This is the whole of what the Prime Minister said yesterday in his fine, admirable statement. As for whether he satisfied the majority of the Deputies — it appears something that this evening will show beyond doubt. As for whether he satisfied the Egyptians outside the Chamber — we can assure the Prime Minister, in all honesty, and the Prime Minister can assure himself, in all honesty, that there is no way that he did. For Egyptians are not satisfied by speech — not by speech that signifies nothing, nor by speech meant merely to dissolve assemblies, as the common people put it. What satisfies them is deeds alone; and if speech there must be, let it be firm, resolute speech, filled with a sense of what is right, a concern to safeguard it, and an insistence on attaining it whatever the circumstances may be. Does the Prime Minister wish us to be frank with him today, as we have been frank with him before? Does the Prime Minister wish us to tell him plainly that the Egyptians expected nothing from him but what he said yesterday, because they know full well that he cannot say anything other than what he said, and they know full well that he does not speak for them, does not speak with their tongue, does not portray what they feel or what they want — and how far is he, indeed, from what the Egyptians feel and what they want?

Let the Prime Minister take pleasure in the Deputies' approval, if approve they do; let the Prime Minister take pleasure in whatever satisfaction the foreigners will show him; and let the Prime Minister remain ignorant of whatever smile the foreigners conceal from him — the smile they exchange among themselves when they are alone together, with the doors shut behind them. As for the Egyptians, let the Prime Minister leave them to what they are; it may well be an act of gentleness and kindness toward him not to tell him what they show, and what they hide.

[Taha Hussein]

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 5 June 1934.