

Inspection...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), August 16, 1934

The inspector is the British High Commissioner, and the subject of the inspection is, it would appear, Egypt in its entirety. We cannot but acknowledge that something new has occurred in the relations between Egypt and England — and it need not be something overt, tangible; it is enough that its effects become apparent and its signs become clear, that it be like electricity, generating movement, heat, and light, its true nature unknown, though its outward manifestations are known perfectly well.

There must, indeed, have been some development in the relations between Egypt and England that permits the High Commissioner to do what High Commissioners have never done before: to tour the eastern and western borders, to travel through the interior of the country as a guest of ministers, to write to the ministries by turns reproving and advising, to summon ministers and under-secretaries and senior officials singly and in groups, and then, apparently, to inspect, the day before yesterday, the police barracks, and yesterday the army barracks. Our ministers know of all this, and profess not to know — they hear of it before it has even happened, or they read of it in the newspapers just as you read of it and just as I read of it. Our ministers are pleased about it, or displeased. But what good is pleasure or displeasure, if it changes nothing of the facts on the ground, and cannot impel the High Commissioner to do what he does not wish to do, or deter him from doing what he does wish to do?

The High Commissioner is a great man, representing a great power, backed in that representation by a great army, and assisted in that representation by great officials drawn from his own countrymen, spread throughout the departments and bureaus of this country. He gives full expression to all that greatness in a weak country whose people wish it to be great too, but whose masters begrudge it any greatness, insisting instead that it remain humble, content with whatever lowliness and misfortune God has decreed for it. When the High Commissioner went to inspect the eastern borders, the ministers fell silent — and who knows? Perhaps they met him there and asked him about the state of those borders, learning from him what they had not known. When he went to inspect the western borders, the ministers fell silent — or mentioned that those borders deserved a visit, and went out to see them, spending a day

and part of another before returning with some knowledge of what they had not previously known about those borders, though very little indeed of the great deal the High Commissioner had learned on his own inspection tour.

And when the High Commissioner wished to penetrate into the depths of Egypt, to see the Egyptians working in their fields, to speak with them and hear from them as they carry the burdens of life and toil under its hardships, one of the ministers invited him to a lunch banquet and made ready whatever was wanted and whatever was not, and his colleagues felt a certain unease about this invitation — but they kept their feelings to themselves and did not mumble their secrets from behind a thick veil. And then matters settled, and the wind steadied in the ministry's sails and the ministry's ship, while the High Commissioner went east and west and north and south, asking about what he had no business asking about, and entering into what he had no business entering into. And then the day of departure drew near, and it would not do for the High Commissioner to leave Egypt without having assured himself about everything — having already assured himself that her borders in the east and west are capable of repelling an attack from without, he had now to assure himself that her army and her police are capable of maintaining order within. He had, therefore, to pay some attention to the matter of the army, and some attention to the matter of the police — so he visited the police barracks on Tuesday, and the army barracks on Wednesday. And who knows what he will visit on Thursday before departing on Friday? For the man wishes to travel with his mind at ease, assured that nothing will happen to Egypt, near or far, in his absence!

What is strange is that when the High Commissioner visited the police barracks, no Egyptian official was on hand to receive him; instead, he was received by two Englishmen, one the director of European public security — whose oversight over the police, by virtue of that directorship, is, we believe, either very slight or nonexistent — and the other the director of police affairs in Alexandria, namely the commandant. As for the Minister of the Interior, his under-secretary or under-secretaries, and the Egyptian director of public security, they were busy spreading out documents in the Ministry of the Interior on one side, and arranging bathing and sunbathing and sea air along the coast on the other.

And when the High Commissioner visited the army barracks, the Minister of War was not there to meet him, for the Minister of War is too

lofty and too important to meet a foreign representative in the army barracks — had he done so, he would have acknowledged the High Commissioner's right to visit the army. And there is a kind of tact that requires ministers to avert their eyes and let things run as though they had not known of them — and this may be the very feeblest of faiths, but it is faith of a kind, at any rate. For the High Commissioner did visit one of the army barracks — though it was an unofficial visit, not witnessed by the minister, and perhaps he was not even informed of it. Thus rights are preserved, heads held high, and independence is none the worse.

There are, however, two questions — or a set of questions — that we put forward without expecting any answer, for the cabinet is too great to bother answering people like us, Egyptians who meddle in what does not concern them and ask about what they ought not to know.

The first of these questions concerns the cabinet's awareness of these visits: did it know beforehand, or only after the fact? Did it grant permission, or did it learn what had happened only once it was done? And what is its view of these visits? Are they compatible with independence, or not? Or is there some secret it does not know, spoken of by some who speak of such things, which we for our part have no wish to echo?

A second question: can Egypt's Minister of War visit the barracks and encampments where the occupation army is quartered — though they stand on Egyptian soil, and though Egyptian sovereignty ought by rights to extend over them?

And a third question: has the position of the High Commissioner in Egypt changed, so that he has become a "proconsul," as the Romans used to say — or, if you would prefer the Arabic translation of this strange term, a governor of Egypt on England's behalf? If so, where is the official document that establishes for him this new title? From whom was it issued, when was it issued, and to whom was it addressed? Or is he still a High Commissioner like those other High Commissioners whom Egypt has known since independence was declared? If so, from where has he acquired this sweeping authority, this wide prestige? It has come to him from the weakness of the ministers, and from their dread of objecting to anything he does or any matter he has in mind, lest a crisis arise between them and him whose consequences none but God can know.

Questions we put forward — not to the ministers, for they will not answer; not to the English, for they will not answer; but to the Egyptians, those who still believe that they are free in their own country, that they

are seeking independence, that they have won a part of their right and are still seeking the rest of it. These Egyptians will read these questions and will answer them for themselves. They will know in what direction their affairs are tending, and where they are being pushed. And what remains to them of the independence for which they shed their blood, bore their disasters, and sacrificed everything dear?