

Minds...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), August 30, 1934

Yet their owners are the people furthest of all from rest, and nearest of all to exhaustion; the people furthest of all from security, and nearest of all to fear.

Minds unlike other minds: they understand things otherwise than things ought to be understood, interpret them by the very opposite of what they ought to be interpreted by, and explain them through their own contraries and negations — because they do not operate straight, or balanced, or free, or left to run according to their own true nature, but are twisted, because their owners want them twisted, and bent out of true, because their owners force them out of true. And they do this to their own minds because their own affairs cannot proceed smoothly unless minds are twisted, logic bent, thinking corrupted, and life turned upside down, or inside out, or on its head, or on its heels.

These are the pro-government men, whose lives cannot proceed smoothly, whose existence cannot grow calm, except when they feel assured that no emergency will arise, no incident will occur, to trouble the cabinet. They are content so long as events run in their favor and circumstances assist them; but the moment events show any inclination away from them, any turn against them, they abandon the truth and take up residence in fantasy instead — for they are too weak to face the truth, too weak to endure its bitter taste, too weak to stand firm against its unsettling emergencies. And fantasy is an easy, pliant thing, capable of being painted in the most contradictory shapes, colored in the most divergent hues — especially when reason has no say in the matter, and only wishes and hopes hold sway.

It appears that the affair of the High Commissioner, his departure, and the delegation of the head of the Egyptian Department at the Foreign Office to act in his stead, has had the profoundest effect on the lives of these pro-government men, driving their minds quite off course, filling their hearts with fear and terror, and leaving them in a state of confusion from which they have not yet managed to free themselves. For the man had shown himself neither accommodating nor peaceable during his time in Egypt. He had done nothing but command and forbid, ask about matters that were none of his business, and meddle in affairs that were no concern of his — and he expressed, however rarely, sentiments and

inclinations, doctrines and opinions, that the pro-government men had no wish to see expressed at all. It was then said that he intended to travel, and that he had informed the cabinet of this — or had not informed it, but that the cabinet learned it instead from the news, along with word that a certain man would act in his place in his duties, once appointed adviser to his office — a man called Mr. Kelly. The man then departed, and the ship carrying him had scarcely crossed the breadth of sea between Egypt and Italy before it emerged that the one who would act in his place was not, after all, his new adviser, but rather the head of the Egyptian Department at the Foreign Office.

At that, hearts grew troubled, minds grew bewildered, and the pro-government men began asking one another questions, turning every possibility this way and that, weighing every conceivable interpretation against every other. And when the talk of emergencies began, the trouble only increased, the bewilderment only intensified, the confusion only grew, until these men found themselves groping in darkness, not knowing which way to turn, nor how to understand what had been said to them, nor what was intended for them.

From that time on, talk multiplied, rumors spread, and the talk among the pro-government men grew even more abundant than among the opposition. Rumors, too, circulated more widely among pro-government circles than among opposition circles. This was because the pro-government men's whole way of life, their enjoyment of whatever prestige and authority they enjoy, their peace of mind regarding his departure — all of it hinges on whatever concerns the High Commissioner, or surrounds the High Commissioner, and whatever concerns the Foreign Office in London, or surrounds the Foreign Office in London.

The High Commissioner said one thing about his deputy; the British Foreign Office said something else; and events themselves said something else again. And so the first question the pro-government men ought to have put to themselves was this: did the High Commissioner know, or did the High Commissioner not know, what the Foreign Office had resolved concerning the sending of Mr. Patterson to Egypt? This is a grave question. For if the High Commissioner did know what the Foreign Office had resolved, then his telling the cabinet something else entirely, or his withholding anything from the cabinet at all, points to a genuine danger, and a mystery wrapped in a very great deal of obscurity. And if the High Commissioner did not know what the Foreign Office had

resolved, then this very ignorance itself points to a genuine danger, and a mystery wrapped in a great deal of obscurity as well — for it raises the possibility that the High Commissioner himself might be replaced, and in the replacement of the High Commissioner lie dangers and mysteries whose true nature and consequences are known only to those deeply versed in such matters.

And so these men went on asking, and pressing their question insistently, until, wearied at last by the whole affair, they seem to have given up any productive inquiry, turned away from straightforward reasoning altogether, and taken refuge instead in wishes and hopes. And they set about weighing which of the two possibilities better suited their immediate interest, and better befitted the cabinet's standing among the people of Egypt.

There can be no doubt that, once people learn that the High Commissioner told the cabinet something other than what he knew, or concealed from the cabinet some part of what he knew, this stands as conclusive proof that matters between him and the cabinet were not proceeding smoothly, nor evenly, nor in accordance with the pro-government men's own wishes. And so it would be the very best of outcomes for it to be broadcast among the people that the High Commissioner, just like the cabinet, was in complete ignorance of what the Foreign Office had resolved concerning Mr. Patterson's assumption of duties at the High Commissioner's residence during Sir Miles Lampson's absence. This would be nearer to an excuse, and more likely to lead people to understand a great many things, some of which happen to suit the interests of the pro-government men rather well.

And so it was rumored, and then published in Al-Muqattam, that the High Commissioner had known nothing whatsoever of the matter of his deputy. Then the rumor persisted, and Al-Muqattam persisted in it as well, and the matter passed from Al-Muqattam to other newspapers loyal to and sympathetic toward the cabinet. And then these men set about assembling proof that the High Commissioner, just like the cabinet, was ignorant of the Foreign Office's view, and of what it had resolved.

This manner of reasoning suits the minds of the pro-government men, and the conduct of the cabinet, perfectly. For the pro-government men have grown accustomed to seeing officials, senior and junior alike, transferred, reassigned, and dismissed without any warning to themselves, without any anticipation of what fate has in store for them.

How many Egyptian officials arrive at their offices each morning at ease, only to learn, almost before they have settled in, that they have been transferred from one department to another, from one city to another, from one bureau to another! How many Egyptian officials return home each evening at ease, only to learn, upon reading the evening papers, that they have been transferred, or dismissed, or struck by whatever misfortune the cabinet has seen fit to visit upon them! And the High Commissioner is, after all, an official like any other, subordinate to a ministry, with superiors capable of deciding his fate through transfer or removal, to say nothing of shortening or extending his leave, to say nothing of delegating this man or that to act in his stead during any absence, long or short. What, then, could possibly prevent the High Commissioner from being transferred suddenly, without his own knowledge, exactly as so-and-so is transferred from the headship of one department to the office of some minister, or from his post in Cairo to some other post in Aswan? And what could possibly prevent the High Commissioner from being dismissed without warning or expectation, suddenly, without inquiry, without accounting, without investigation — just as Professor al-Sanhuri, for instance, was dismissed from the Faculty of Law? This is an official, and that is an official; this is a job, and that is a job; this is a ministry, and that is a ministry.

And so the pro-government men's reasoning fell into place: they supposed, then grew certain, then grew reassured, then spread the word, then pressed insistently in spreading it, that the High Commissioner had departed in complete ignorance of who his deputy would be, and had learned nothing whatsoever of the matter until he read the newspapers in Italy, or read the telegrams aboard ship — exactly as Professor al-Sanhuri learned that he had been dismissed from his post only when he saw the news of his dismissal published in Al-Ahram.

One ought not point out to these pro-government men that there is anything strange, however slight or however considerable, in this reasoning — that the English are not Egyptians, and that the conventions governing removal, dismissal, transfer, and delegation within the British Foreign Office differ entirely from these same conventions within the Egyptian cabinet during this blessed era. One ought not say any of this to the pro-government men, for they are incapable of understanding any of it. To them, the High Commissioner is simply an official, and that is that; the British Foreign Secretary can transfer him, or remove him, or delegate whomever he pleases in his stead, and that is that — exactly as

our own Minister of Traditions can do the very same to whichever official he pleases. And once you realize that this whole affair might, with a little more skill in spreading the message and gaining time, move beyond this simple-minded reasoning altogether, you begin to forgive the pro-government men for whatever hopes they console themselves with, and whatever stories they broadcast among the people. For who knows! Perhaps the High Commissioner's leave was extended precisely on the basis of some discreet wish that reached the British Foreign Office from certain quarters concerned with Egyptian political affairs. And who knows — perhaps this extension of leave is merely a first step, to be followed by a second step, more explicit still, and clearer in its effect. And who knows — perhaps those who worked to extend this leave, and who are working toward whatever steps will follow it, are the very same people who asked the Foreign Office to send Mr. Patterson to carry out the High Commissioner's duties in Egypt. If so, then it is not only Egyptian affairs that fall to the Egyptian cabinet and the Egyptian pro-government men, but also, at the very least, English affairs at the residence of the High Commissioner.

They are, then, powerful men — men holding sway not only over the Wafd and the Wafdists alone, but over the Conservatives, the Liberals, and the Labour men in England itself. They are, then, the true masters of affairs, remaining in power with none to dispute them, none to oppose them. And so long as they hold power over the High Commissioner's own affairs — extending his leave, delegating this man rather than that to act in his stead — then surely they hold power to transfer him, or to remove him too; and they surely hold power, beyond any doubt, to do to the Wafd and the Wafdists, to Egypt and the Egyptians, whatever they please. The one thing they do not hold power over is straight thinking — the very thing that would enable them to govern soundly, and to reason well. But what can one possibly do, or hope to do, with people whose intelligence arrives at precisely this point, beyond which no further intelligence exists?

Be that as it may, the official doctrine among the pro-government men — the doctrine all Egyptians are meant to believe — is that the High Commissioner departed in complete ignorance of what was intended for him, for his residence, and for his affairs in Egypt during his absence, and that the Egyptian cabinet, too, was ignorant of this out of mere courtesy toward the High Commissioner. In actual fact, of course, it knew perfectly well. And from this it follows that all Egyptians are meant to

believe that this talk of emergencies is idle nonsense with no basis whatsoever, that this talk of change is folly with no evidence to support it, and that everything is calm along the banks of the Nile — except the Nile itself, which remains a great deal turbulent. But the Nile is an easy matter, one the cabinet can readily control and master.

The cabinet, then, remains — calm, secure, never at any point stronger than it is at this very moment.

Did I not tell you these were minds worth remarking on?