

Waiting

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1 They say that the anticipation of calamity is worse than its arrival, for in anticipating what is dreaded lies a torment whose source is the turmoil between hope and despair, between hopelessness and expectation, while in the arrival of what is dreaded lies a restful despair, one that brings in its train submission to what could not be avoided. And it is certain that the pillars of official politics are, in these days, laboring under a long and heavy wait, meeting in these days a torment that stings the soul and disturbs the pillow, and bearing in these days pains that are no small matter to endure with patience and steadfastness.

2 The Sidqi-ists taste the torment of waiting for what events will reveal of the great dictator's triumph or his downfall. And the Abd al-Fattah-ists taste the torment of waiting for what these troubles will bring to light of the prime minister's victory, or his being forced into defeat and the laying down of arms, or into prolongation and the dissolution of the Chamber of Deputies. And perhaps the two rivals — Sidqi Pasha and Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha — are the most pained of all people, the most straitened by this waiting. As for the People's Party men, if you examine their affairs, they are delighted with the amusing position in which they now find themselves; each of them courts it, each of them desires it, each of them works to support it and takes care to lend it aid. Each of them meets with sweet, radiant, gleaming smiles from Sidqi Pasha, and each of them finds, behind these smiles, hopes and wishes that lend life a beautiful rosy hue for an hour of the day or an hour of the night. Each of them feels that these days he has power over Sidqi Pasha, after Sidqi Pasha once had power over him, that he now holds sway over Sidqi Pasha, after Sidqi Pasha once held sway over him. Each of them can meet yesterday's tyrant with a measure of humiliation that vexes and embarrasses him, and with a measure of haughtiness that fills his breast with grief and his heart with rancor and spite, and that nonetheless drives him to flattery, appeasement, and submission to the rulings of fate. Each of them recalls those days when Sidqi Pasha was too exalted, too great, to issue his orders to any one of them with the tip of his tongue; he had only to wish, and he would smile, or wish, and he would frown, or wish, and he would gesture with the corner of his eye or the tip of his finger, and his partisans and helpers would rush to hear and obey, and to

bend to whatever the great dictator wished. Now Sidqi Pasha has come to court them, to press his courting, to plead, and to press his pleading; he spreads tables and takes pains in preparing food, sends out enticements to right and left, dispatches emissaries and envoys, and lets his tongue loose in praise, flattery, entreaty, and begging, hoping his followers will answer him and renew with him the breaking of bread and salt. And while the People's Party men preen and swagger and feel that delight felt by one who rises to might after abasement, to command after obedience, and to mastery after submission, the prime minister and his companions likewise smile at the People's Party men, seek their favor, draw near to them, and send them emissaries and envoys. The People's Party men, who once used to seek out the prime minister and the ministers, are now sought out themselves, and no longer do the seeking; they now hold themselves in high esteem and look down upon those who once looked upon them yesterday with arrogance and pride. And it is no small thing for the People's Party men to feel that they hold power over the founder of the present order, and over the guardian of the present order. Add to this that the People's Party men come out ahead whatever happens: they gain food and drink at Malloum Pasha's and Ali al-Manzalawi Bey's, and they gain food and drink today at Sidqi Pasha's, and at Sidqi Pasha's again on Thursday. What harm is it to them if the quarrel drags on and the dispute persists! In it they find these varied pleasures belonging to those who hold power without being accustomed to holding it, who stir up desire in others without being accustomed to anything but desiring themselves, and who enjoy what people are rarely granted to enjoy in these days except when rivalries grow fierce between a prime minister like Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha and a party leader like Ismail Sidqi Pasha.

3 As for those who suffer from this discord and grieve over this rivalry, and taste every variety of torment while others taste every variety of food and drink, these are the leaders and grandees who hear promises and dread their breaking, who see contentment and fear resentment, who sense support and anticipate desertion, and who then spend their hours in counting and reckoning, in searching and inquiry.

4 "Our partisans have reached upward of thirty; if so-and-so joins them, and so-and-so does me the favor, they may reach forty; and if they join the Unionists, the majority will be complete for us — but this so-and-so is a slippery dodger: He gives you sweetness from the tip of his tongue, and slips away from you as the fox slips away."

5 And while the ministers and the ministers' partisans are occupied with this reckoning and calculation, Sidqi Pasha and those who drive Sidqi Pasha forward are occupied with no less reckoning and calculation of their own; they too count and tally, they too search and inquire, they too trust and doubt, and they too burn — what a fire! — from the length of this waiting. And waiting is at its ugliest in its effect, and the fire at its most searing, when the encounter comes and passes, and yields doubt rather than certainty, suspicion rather than trust; then hearts flutter, souls are troubled, the sky darkens, life grows narrow for the living, and the grandees wish they were not grandees, and the leaders wish they were not leaders. Then weakness reaches its utmost with them and weariness comes to its limit, and they wring their hands, resign themselves to God's decree, and take up the waiting once more, and the scorching of that fire once more. And you would be mistaken to think these words exaggeration, or enticement, or meant merely as jest and levity. For if the veils were lifted from you and you could see into hearts, you would know that these words picture the matter to you exactly as it stands.

6 And people are asking why the decree summoning parliament to convene has not yet been issued, though the date set for parliament's convening has drawn near, and drawn nearer still, and though custom has always had this decree issued a month or more before parliament convenes, not a matter of days. And people are asking how the minister of traditions has fallen short of what tradition demands, and how he has allowed himself such negligence. And when the asking grew frequent and the talk ran long, an answer appeared from behind the veil, and those who offer answers said: the decree is delayed only until the clouds part and the stars prove true, and the People's Party men declare where they stand; if they stand with the ministry, the decree will be issued, and if they stand with the dictator, then dissolution is certain.

7 People had been saying, and the newspapers had reported, that the council of ministers would meet this morning, and people had said, and the newspapers had reported, that once the council met it would prepare the decree summoning parliament. Then, yesterday evening, people were saying the council had been postponed to the morrow; and this morning the newspapers report that the council is postponed to the morrow once more. And people ask what lies behind this postponement, and what its purpose is. And the crafty and the pessimistic say that the source of this postponement is the stranger's banquet; for who knows —

perhaps those who answer the dictator's call, who dine at his table today and promise him victory and support, may prove more numerous than those who went to Heliopolis, drank tea, and applauded the prime minister on Friday, in which case it would be wise to think again before preparing the decree summoning parliament. Or perhaps those who answer the dictator's call may prove a small handful, a negligible band that tips the balance neither way, in which case the decree summoning parliament might be hastened along. We do not know whether this reading of the council's postponement is correct, or whether it is a flight of fancy and a piece of jesting. But what admits no doubt is that people are suspicious of this delay in summoning parliament, and look with some astonishment upon the council's postponement on the very day the great dictator holds his banquet. And if we are permitted to interpret, or to venture a word, we do not hesitate to feel sympathy for the ministry over this slowness and postponement; for they suggest not that it is hesitant, though it shows resolve, not that it is afraid, though it shows confidence, not that it is weak, though it feigns strength, and that it shows disdain for its ailing rival, while, left alone with itself, it reckons him a heavy account.

8 And it seems most likely that this hesitation of the ministry's is what will bring it, in the end, to swift failure; for it whets its rivals' appetite and emboldens its enemies among the Sidqi-ists. Had the ministry known how to meet rivalry and stand firm against its rivals, it would not have delayed in securing the decree, nor would it have reckoned Sidqi Pasha worth a second thought; for Sidqi Pasha means too little even to his own partisans for them to anger the ministry on his account. But they see weakness and grow doubtful, they see hesitation and grow suspicious, and some say to others: Sidqi Pasha himself did not weaken, did not hesitate, when the matter lay in his hands, and were there not some hidden secret, some fate already settled, some affairs contrived by night, the ministry would not have taken up so weak a stand. And who knows — perhaps hidden powers stand behind the dictator, and embolden him in this fight for which he was never fit and never capable.

9 And thus matters spoil between the two camps: each fears the other, each suspects the other, each schemes against the other. And what do you make of a bond built on fear and scheming? And the amusing thing is that the stranger's encounter will end — as the Heliopolis encounter ended — in doubt rather than certainty, so that the ministry's hesitation and turmoil only grow. And who knows — perhaps it will

postpone the council, or the preparing of the decree, to Friday, or to Saturday, once the two decisive encounters of Thursday, at the agriculture minister's house and at the People's Party club, have played themselves out.

10 Whatever the case may be, the pillars of official politics are entitled to take delight in the strength they have arrived at, and the triumph they have won. And what strength could be greater, what triumph more splendid, than for a group of men to claim for themselves that they are the guardians of the order and its protectors, when in truth they amount to nothing more than a diversion, amusing people and making them laugh with what they say and do!