

Deadline . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), October 1, 1934

The Minister of Traditions set a date for the negotiators the day before yesterday, and placed on record that the present government — of which he is naturally a member — will remain in power until the year 1936, at which point the government will submit itself to the judgment of the people, to see whether they are content with it or angry at it.

We do not write this in order to argue with the Minister of Traditions, or to debate him. God has endowed the Minister of Traditions with such intelligence and perception, such skill and wisdom, such penetrating insight and soundness of judgment, such strength of argument and clarity of proof, that he stands entirely beyond debate or discussion.

And what compels us to spare ourselves, and to take pity on ourselves, and refrain from adopting any posture of debate or dispute toward him, is this: in this particular matter, we find ourselves in complete agreement with the Minister of Traditions, always. And who, in any case, could hope to resist the sea when it swells, the lion when it roars, the storm when it pours down? No indeed — we did not write this to debate the Minister of Traditions. The Minister of Traditions stands above debate. It is a certainty that the Minister of Traditions will remain in power year after year — God forgive us, indeed decade after decade — for the Minister of Traditions has been imposed upon Egypt; he shall govern her until he is no longer capable of governing, and shall subdue her until he is too exhausted to subdue her further, because this is what he wishes above all else, and whenever the Minister of Traditions wishes something, nothing can turn that wish aside. And because his genius, his extraordinary faculties, his superiority beyond all description — beyond the reach of anyone who might attempt to describe it — all qualify him for uninterrupted rule, for authority with no limit whatsoever. Egypt, surely, loves herself and safeguards her own interests far too dearly ever to exchange the Minister of Traditions for any other minister — he being the wise minister, the like of whom Egypt has never before seen for soundness and rectitude, for perception and intelligence, for patience and forbearance. He shall therefore remain in power for as long as God wills; he remains in power by Egypt's own consent and will — indeed, by Egypt's own insistent pleading — and he remains in power, moreover, to

the satisfaction of the English, who trust him, rely upon him, and place their hopes in him. For the Minister of Traditions is a strong man, and yet, for all that, flexible enough to achieve two things that only the rarest of geniuses — geniuses Egyptian history has not yet even encountered — could ever hope to achieve at once: he satisfies the English, and he satisfies the Egyptians, compelling both sides at once to want him, and only him, as Minister of Education, and never to exchange him for anyone else. And he furnishes proof, at every single moment, of this extraordinary capacity, this superhuman skill — as when the School of Engineering proposes the promotion of an Egyptian professor, and he exiles that professor to the provinces to please the Egyptians, while ordering the selection of a British professor instead, to please the English. In this manner, he unites what cannot possibly be united: the most flatly contradictory opposites. Woe to the English, should they ever tire of him or turn against him; woe to the Egyptians, should they ever desire otherwise or grow weary of him. He is the Minister of Education, created for education, and education created for him — of this there is no doubt, and no possible room for doubt whatsoever. But the Minister of Education is, by his very nature, a model held up before tens of thousands — indeed hundreds of thousands — of professors and teachers, of students and pupils, and of the families of those students and pupils. He is the supreme exemplar for all of them: in sincerity when he acts, in moderation when he thinks, in correctness when he judges, in gentleness when he decides. And all of these qualities have come together perfectly in the Minister of Traditions, as they have never come together in any minister before him, and as they shall never come together in any minister after him. And it is for this very reason that he has won the love and support of Egyptians, and their fervent wish that he remain their Minister of Education for as long as Egypt has any Ministry of Education left to speak of.

The Minister of Education is always truthful, for he is himself the very model and wellspring of truthfulness, the exemplar held up before professors and students alike — and it is for this very reason that he speaks only the truth, and brings before the Council of Ministers nothing but plain fact. It is for this very reason, too, that he did not hesitate to request of the Council of Ministers the dismissal of a certain professor of law, setting out this request in an official memorandum that was, in its entirety, nothing but truth and fact — so thoroughly so that the Council of Ministers did not hesitate for a moment to accept it, to rely upon it, and to dismiss the professor the Minister of Traditions wished dismissed. Only

afterward did it emerge that the memorandum contained a certain matter that had no relation whatsoever to truth, and no connection whatsoever to fact — a matter the man it was attributed to categorically denied, and which the very newspapers that had originally leveled the charge against him now declared false.

The Minister of Education is likewise a model of correctness in his thinking, and it is for this very reason that he neither doubts nor hesitates to declare that Mussolini, Hitler, and Doumergue are all, in fact, taking their cue from Egypt's present system of government whenever they alter the systems that once prevailed in their own countries — even though it later emerges that Mussolini had established his own system before the Egyptian system ever came into being; that Hitler had conceived his system and labored zealously to promote it back when Sidqi Pasha was not yet even dreaming he might one day head a government, and when the Minister of Traditions himself was spending his best hours at the Continental Hotel; and that Doumergue, for his part, seeks no overturning of the system at all, no departure from the constitution, no transgression of the law, no compulsion of the people to accept what they do not wish. None of this troubles the Minister of Traditions in the least, for he never spoke anything but the truth, and never saw anything but what was correct — and because whatever the rest of the world happens to know is simply wrong, while whatever he alone knows is simply right. The Minister of Traditions is likewise a model of purity in speech, disliking all quarrelsomeness, his own character far too refined to permit him ever to resort to vulgar language or coarse speech — even though it later emerges that he describes his opponents as deceivers and charlatans, as agents of deception and error, as traitors and sinners, and with other such labels that ought never to issue from educated men, let alone from ministers, let alone from Ministers of Education, let alone from the most senior officers of the University, let alone from men who once served as royal counselors — men who, elsewhere, would themselves punish others for cursing, hold them to account for insult, and demand of the public a purity of hand, of conscience, and of tongue. None of this troubles the Minister of Traditions in the least, for these filthy expressions and coarse words are themselves purified, filled with cleanliness, the very moment they pass across his chaste tongue, issue from his pure mouth, and occur to his noble conscience.

The Minister of Education is likewise a model of moderation, a rejecter of vanity, a believer in the principle that the truly resolute,

sensible man — the man of balanced mind and sound judgment — is precisely the man who is never deceived by circumstance, never taken in by conditions, never carried away by hope, never soars off with mere fancy, and never indulges himself in promises that events themselves offer no guarantee of fulfilling; and it is for this very reason that he labors at his worldly affairs as though he would live forever, and labors for the life to come as though he might die tomorrow. Even though it later emerges that he behaves as though he controlled the very course of events, as though he held dominion over circumstance itself, extending his own power and authority indefinitely, and declaring that he will remain in power until the year 1936 no matter how violently the earth trembles beneath him, no matter how furiously the sky rages above him, no matter how thoroughly the very air around him grows foul — none of this troubles him in the least, for vanity itself is transformed into moderation the very instant it touches him or occurs to him, and excess of self-confidence and mockery of fate are themselves transformed into humility and equilibrium the very instant they cross his mind. He is, as you can see, a model in every single respect; he is, as you can see, entirely fit to be Minister of Education, and to remain Minister of Education; and he is, as you can see, precisely the man to raise our sons in the finest possible manner, to refine them with the finest possible refinement, and to teach them how to become men — truthful, sincere men, who prefer the truth, hold fast to what is right, rise above baseness, keep themselves free of base appetites, and guard themselves against vanity. And should Egypt ever be so fortunate as to find a man as truthful, as upright, as pure — pure of heart, of conscience, and of tongue — as the Minister of Traditions, then woe to her if she should ever exchange him for another minister, and woe to her if she should fail to put him forward for the premiership itself. And it is for all these reasons that I am fully, entirely confident that the Minister of Traditions was entirely correct in the date he set the day before yesterday — that he will indeed remain in power until the year 1936, but only after first ascending to the premiership itself. And I bring him the glad tidings that on the very day the premiership is entrusted to him, he will find himself in a position of sheer bewilderment, for every single ministry will come pleading to him, begging him to serve as its own minister as well — and who knows? Perhaps the Egyptian nation, having grown so enchanted with the Minister of Traditions, so utterly bewitched by his virtues and qualities, will decide that he alone ought to head the entire government, and be Minister of every single ministry at once — so that we might simply hand over to him the management of every single one of them, sharing that

responsibility with no one else, assisted in it by not a single colleague, spending an hour, or perhaps half an hour, at each ministry in turn, and then, at the end of each month, collecting, in addition to his salary as Prime Minister, the salaries of every single other minister besides. And I assure you that he is entirely worthy of this, entirely deserving of it, entirely capable of desiring it and awaiting it — for what could possibly be beyond the reach of ambition, what could possibly elude the grasp of the boldest hope, once it has filled so vast and capacious a mind?