

Secrets...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), August 27, 1934

The Egyptian people may amuse themselves, if amusement suits their nature, and may grieve, if grief suits their nature better — for there can be no doubt that their political life just now is amusing and grievous at once. Indeed, the Egyptian people may take pride, if pride suits their nature, and may despair, if despair suits their nature better — for their political life just now calls for pride and despair at once. This is because the Egyptian people can say, without exaggeration and without error, that they are the only people among civilized nations who remain entirely ignorant of their own affairs — as though those affairs did not concern them, did not touch them, had no connection to them whatsoever, near or far, but concerned some other people entirely, with whom they share neither tie nor cause. For talk goes on, rumors fill the air, conversations spring up in the clubs, suspicions churn in every mind — and all of it concerns the affairs of the Egyptian people, indeed the most intimate affairs of the Egyptian people, indeed their very life — while the Egyptian people themselves know nothing whatsoever of these affairs, and can make out neither a little of them nor a great deal.

They are told that grave emergencies may arise concerning their homeland, that may alter their way of life, may alter their system of government, may cost them their interests, may bring them great benefit or utter ruin — and that the English are making ready for these emergencies: their representative, having spent his time in Egypt studying the matter at great length, and investigating it most thoroughly, then departs, and neither his government nor he himself is satisfied to have him represented, in his absence, by the usual members of his own household staff, but instead delegates the head of the Egyptian Department at the Foreign Office to shoulder the burden of representing him, in readiness for these emergencies, in anticipation of these surprises — while the Egyptian people remain ignorant of these very emergencies, know nothing whatsoever of the nature of these surprises, as though these emergencies might befall the English alone and not the Egyptians, as though these surprises might confront the English alone and not the Egyptians, as though the system that might change were not a system the Egyptians themselves live under, as though the interests that might be lost were not the interests of the Egyptians themselves, as though the matters that might be settled or unsettled did not touch the very life of

the Egyptians.

And yet the English are making these preparations in Egypt — not in Malta, not in India — which means these emergencies will indeed arise in Egypt, and will indeed take by surprise those who dwell in Egypt, and will indeed touch their lives and their interests. It would only be natural, then, for the Egyptians to prepare for these emergencies just as the English prepare for them, and to make ready to meet them just as the English make ready to meet them — but instead, they remain secrets, secrets that must be kept even from their own subjects, secrets that must be hidden even from those who will be affected by them, for better or for worse.

This is a strange thing, in an age we are told is an age of liberty and enlightenment, an age in which the affairs of nations are said no longer to be conducted behind a curtain, no longer screened from view by opaque veils.

This is a strange thing, incomprehensible in a country said to possess a constitutional order, one that places the people's own affairs in the people's own hands, and makes oversight of the people's own interests a right belonging to Parliament.

This is a strange thing, comprehensible only in a country whose people are wholly subjected to authority, wholly denied liberty, where the rulers regard the ruled exactly as shepherds regard their flocks — driving them to pasture that they may graze, driving them to water that they may drink, taking from their milk and their wool, from their down and their hair, whatever pleases them to take, never consulting them, never asking them, never informing them of anything — because a flock cannot hear what is said to it, cannot understand what is meant by it, cannot offer any answer in reply.

This is a strange thing, comprehensible only in a country where the rulers believe themselves possessed of absolute right over the people and the people's affairs — settling matters and unsettling them, coming and going, exactly as they please, with no one entitled to ask them what they are doing. We would very much like to know: what country is this, exactly, that we live in? What homeland is this, exactly, whose soil we inhabit? What people is this, exactly, that stirs restlessly along the banks of the Nile? For if we truly lived in a free country, and truly dwelt in an independent homeland, and truly formed part of a noble people possessed of all the rights of civilized nations, bound by all their duties in turn — then surely that people ought not to remain ignorant of its own

affairs, nor have secrets kept from it, nor be told that grave emergencies may be arising, that momentous events may be occurring, that great misfortunes may be approaching, and that others are watching for them, and preparing for them, while you yourself must simply sleep, and sleep deeply; simply eat, and eat to excess; simply enjoy whatever pleasures life has to offer; simply bear whatever cares are poured upon you; simply live as a flock lives, your affairs entrusted to infallible shepherds, since such affairs ought never to be entrusted to you, incapable as you are of shouldering them, or even of giving them thought.

And yet this Egyptian people has gone so far as to ask, has pressed insistently to learn the facts. Told that the English representative was visiting the border, it asked about the origin of this border visit, its secret purpose, its meaning, and by what right the English representative undertook it. Told that the English representative was visiting the police and the army, it asked how such a visit could take place, why it should take place, and by what right it should take place. Told that the English representative was monopolizing the handling of the public debt, the Mixed Courts, and the Capitulations, to the exclusion of the very Egyptian cabinet established to handle precisely such matters — not to bask in comfort and sea breezes — it asked about this too, and pressed insistently in its asking, sought some explanation, and pressed insistently in its seeking. But no one answered it. No one paid it any heed, or turned in its direction at all.

How, then, can this state of affairs possibly be understood? How can the ministers possibly bear to tolerate it? How can the ministers' consciences possibly rest easy, seeing a people as vast as the Egyptian people kept in complete ignorance of even its own most pressing affairs, while all manner of alarming reports are broadcast among it, all manner of conflicting, frightening warnings circulated to it — a people that asks, and receives no answer; that inquires, and receives no reply?

How can the ministers' consciences possibly rest easy, seeing this vast people bewildered, questioning itself and questioning others, about its own interests and what is intended for them, about its own rights and what is being plotted against them — while the ministers themselves are perfectly capable of answering, and yet do not answer; or are incapable of answering, and yet remain in their posts regardless, despite this incapacity and this inadequacy, or despite this negligence and this failure.

This alone is a great deal — and greater still is that people should nonetheless go on saying that Egyptians live as free nations live, exist as civilized peoples exist, and that their affairs are overseen by a cabinet no different from the cabinets of any other advanced country.

Who could possibly claim that Egypt's affairs, and her very life, are confined to a mere ten Egyptians, and a handful of Englishmen? The former act when they are able to act, and fall helpless when circumstances force helplessness upon them; the latter command and forbid, settle matters and unsettle them, with nothing able to turn back whatever they desire.

Is it not high time this shameful state of affairs came to an end? Is it not high time these dark clouds were dispersed? Is it not high time that light finally penetrated the life of the Egyptians, so that the Egyptian people might see for themselves what is intended for them, and what is being schemed against them — and so that the Egyptian people themselves, not the English, and not the cabinet, but the entire people, might prepare to meet whatever emergencies may arise, and whatever surprises may present themselves?