

# Comedy . . .

*Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), September 28, 1934*

People have been in need of it these days, days in which comedy has grown scarce — for people insist on nothing but seriousness when they speak, and when they act; indeed, they insist, to our great regret, on nothing but deceiving themselves, and being taken in by their own deception, and burdening themselves with seriousness even when they merely think.

It would only be reasonable for people to divide their working lives evenly between seriousness and levity, for it is true that excess of levity kills the heart — but it is equally true that excess of seriousness exhausts the strength, dampens ambition, and drains the appetite for life, especially when social, intellectual, and political life has grown as thoroughly empty as Egyptian life has grown in this blessed era. An empty life does not deserve seriousness, for it becomes, at that point, no different from a millstone that turns and turns, clatters and clatters, and in the end produces nothing, yields no flour at all.

And yet, despite all this, Egyptians go on being serious whenever they speak, serious whenever they act, serious whenever they think — never wearying of seriousness, even when it yields them nothing, and never growing tired of it, even when it leads them nowhere.

They imagine they are living now just as they once lived, in a country where labor bears fruit and seriousness pays off, where the public is duty-bound never to treat public life as sport or mockery. And even though circumstances present them, every single day, with the clearest evidence and the most brilliant proof that they are dreaming, and that the days of seriousness have passed and gone, with God not yet granting them leave to return — despite all this, they refuse to indulge in play, refuse to allow themselves comedy, and look upon life with a gaze heavy with pessimism and light on hope, filled with grief over what has become of their affairs, and grieving deeply over how much of their condition has spoiled.

For all these reasons, comedy ought to be welcomed with gratitude whenever it comes to Egyptians of its own accord, without their asking for it or seeking it out. At such a moment it becomes something very much like a light, sweet breeze that suddenly rises in the midst of heavy,

scorching heat; very much like drops of rain that suddenly fall upon ground long scorched by drought and long deprived of water; very much like glad tidings that suddenly reach you after a run of grim, unsettling news; very much like a delightful dream that visits you on a long and heavy night, one that has plunged you into a deep and leaden sleep crowded with terrifying visions that shake both heart and soul with their horror.

I will not conceal from you that I have found in this particular comedy something resembling every one of these images I have just presented to you. But one thing beyond doubt is that you have not yet learned of this comedy I wish to tell you about, and wish to draw your attention to, so that you may savor it as it deserves, delight in it as it deserves, and turn to it for a moment away from all the grave business pressing in upon you — away from these countless rumors, this endless stream of news, these interminable speculations, and all this heavy anxiety filling the conversations, the hearts, and the minds of Egyptians in these days when everything has been thrown into disorder, when everything has been hidden from the public, and when the public has been left to understand what it can, if it can understand at all; to interpret what it can, if it can interpret at all; and to foresee what it can, if it can foresee at all, of what is yet to come.

You have, no doubt, missed this comedy entirely, and your guesses have carried you off toward any number of other comedies instead. Perhaps you thought of those banquets held for the ministers, or held by the ministers for themselves, or held by the Deputy High Commissioner, who invites to some of them ministers alone, sharing the table with no one outside their own rank, while inviting to others ministers who share the table with officials and journalists alike. Perhaps you thought of the comic doings of our great Minister of Finance, and the discord he keeps stirring up between himself and our good-natured Prime Minister. Perhaps you thought of the Isawiyyat — how many there are, and how many more remain hidden still. Perhaps you thought of whatever speeches will be delivered tomorrow at that momentous gathering the Union Party intends to hold.

Perhaps you thought of some other comedy still, among the many that attach themselves to the government and its doings — but I intended none of these, for what I wished was to turn you away from seriousness altogether, and the life of our government, and everything connected with it, is seriousness through and through; no levity could ever reach it,

no comedy could ever rise to its level. What I have in mind, rather, is this eminent lawyer, who spent years of his life privately convinced, in his own heart, that he was the man most deserving of the premiership, and the most capable of managing the affairs of state. This lawyer had, most likely, taken issue with something, or several things, in the conduct of certain ministries, and had come to think that, were the matter left to him, he would have steered the affairs of state along an entirely different course. His thinking on the matter continued, and pressed upon him, until it was but a short step to his believing that the premiership ought rightfully to be entrusted to him. His thinking continued further still, and lingered so long, that it was but a short step from there to his believing that the premiership had, in fact, already been entrusted to him. He then waited for the signs that would confirm he had indeed become Prime Minister, and his waiting stretched on and on. Being a conscientious man, he did not hesitate meanwhile to draft policies and programs, to prepare regulations and laws, and to compose orders and prohibitions — so that once the decree confirming his appointment finally reached him, he would not be caught unprepared, but would already be fully ready for the task. He would then set to work at once, and no sooner would he unveil what he had so carefully prepared than everything would change entirely, the whole system would be transformed, and the life of the Egyptian people would pass from one stage into another.

The man's thinking about the premiership, his preparation for it, and his waiting for it, continued on and on, until he came at last to believe he had genuinely become a minister — that his preparation to govern was itself the conduct of government, and that his waiting for the premiership was itself the discharge of its duties. Yet he sensed that two things were still missing: the Prime Minister's salary, and the decree formally recognizing his premiership. Then, at some hour of the night or some hour of the day, a voice called out to him that the decree had indeed been issued, and that the moment had come to collect his salary. He did not doubt for a moment that his very first duty was to offer his thanks to His Majesty the King, and to receive his exalted commands and his precious counsel concerning matters of state. And so he made his way to Ras al-Tin Palace — where reality met him with its wide-awake, unforgiving face, a face that grants no one dreams, no comedy, no fantasy, but seizes them instead with sheer, bitter, exacting seriousness. And there it was that he was referred to the prosecution, and the investigation began, followed by the forensic physician, then the confirmation of mental illness, and finally his committal to the asylum for the insane.

And yet, for all that, how many resemble this man, telling themselves the very same story he told himself — believing themselves the men most deserving of the premiership, awaiting the day it will be entrusted to them, and pursuing that end through every manner of scheming imaginable. Yet they are never sent to the prosecution, never subjected to any investigation, never forced into the asylum for the insane — for the simple reason that they never made their way to any official place, such as the Palace, or the Prime Minister's own headquarters. And so they remain free to say whatever they wish, to themselves and to others. Do you not agree with me that this comedy, like every other comedy of the Egyptians, dissolves in the end into seriousness — into bitter, painful seriousness?

Do you not agree with me that this illusory, counterfeit minister is neither alone nor rare in Egypt, and that it might well be possible to leave him at liberty — provided his harm to the innocent could be guaranteed against — or else to send along with him a great many more of his kind, men who never actually made their way, as he did, to the Palace, or to the premiership itself? . . .