

Anxiety and Scheming...

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), November 21, 1934

This is a subject no less deserving of literary men's attention than any other, for it touches on public life and touches on private life alike, and offers writers and poets scenes that are genuinely curious — scenes which they could, were they to pause over them and dwell long upon them, and then cast them in their own artistic forms, of verse or of prose, bring forth for the people as manifest signs.

You may notice, as I do, that His Excellency the Prime Minister still disturbs the peace and embitters the life of a great many people, coming between them and calm from the moment the sun rises, and driving sleep from them when night falls. He kept the would-be ministers anxious for days and nights, because he declared no doctrine as to how he would form his ministry, and gave no sign of his direction in choosing his ministers, and left the newspapers to spread rumour and broadcast it, and left talk to grow tangled and opinions to collide, so that every would-be minister pictured himself a minister, and left the would-be ministers free to wander between far-fetched fancy and boundless hope; and these people set off pursuing hope and advancing with fancy, and the public went with them, striving, advancing, watching, waiting — talking, prophesying, and jesting about it all the while. And the Prime Minister sat silent, sunk deep in silence, earnest and busy at his work — until, one evening, people heard certain names, and then, one morning, they looked upon certain persons, and found that the names had not been the expected ones, and the persons had not been the ones awaited.

Thereupon astonishment took the place of anxiety; and astonishment had scarcely passed before resentment took its place, and rancour, and a despair that wears down the heart, and a grief that destroys the soul. And these feelings were not long in producing their natural results, and bearing their daughters — daughters distinguished by lightness and grace, by tact and suppleness, daughters who can slip out of any place and slip into any place, tamper with any heart and corrupt any soul: namely scheming, intrigue, tale-bearing, and gossip, and all that resembles these things among the notions that filled the Egyptian air, and showed themselves too in the English air, from the moment the

ministry was formed and it became clear that the Prime Minister had disappointed hopes, confounded expectations, and chosen his colleagues from outside the ranks of the would-be ministers. Some hold that the Prime Minister has surrendered to the Wafd, taking its command and following it without hesitation or deliberation — and if so, how fine a thing it would be to exploit this notion, and to go scheming against the Prime Minister with the English, and with the Palace!

And others hold that the Prime Minister, for all the submission and deference he has shown the Wafd, has not won its plain and unqualified support — that the Wafd means rather to use his ministry as a path to the elections, and then as a bridge to power — and if so, how fine a thing it would be to exploit this notion to sow corruption between the Wafd and the Prime Minister, to show the Wafd the doubt and suspicion the Prime Minister harbours toward it, and his readiness to conspire against it should the chance arise, and to show the Prime Minister the cunning and deceit the Wafd harbours, and its readiness for an opposition that will not be turned back.

And these daughters of despair, as I have said, are graceful, tactful, light — precious in their very lightness — flying through every air, hastening to every place, delivering their talk with levity, wit, and charm, in every salon and every gathering; then slipping away unfelt by anyone, unnoticed by anyone — so that people come to feel as though whatever tale-bearing and intrigue they had cast about were settled facts, never arisen in that house, never having crept into that salon, never having crept out of that despairing would-be minister, never having been loosed by the tongue of that politician whose hopes were belied, whose expectations were confounded, and from whose grasp the ministry slipped — so that he swore revenge.

But the Prime Minister has not been content merely to keep these people anxious for some days and to drive them to scheming, once their anxiety had passed and despair had settled in its place; rather, he keeps alive a slight remnant of anxiety, stirring a little in the air, enough to bewitch minds, seduce souls, and loosen certain tongues into certain talk. For the Prime Minister still stands in need of two colleagues, or three, more — and who, one wonders, might these two colleagues be? Will the Prime Minister choose among the would-be ministers, from the men of the parties — and if so, whom will he choose, and how will he choose? Or will the Prime Minister choose among the senior officials — and if so, whom will he choose, and how will he choose? So the anxiety is unbroken,

souls are in turmoil, hearts hang suspended, and the men of politics take their precautions: they would love to get the better of the Prime Minister, but they fear he will not choose them for Foreign Affairs or Communications, so they hold back; they would love to scheme against the Prime Minister, but they hope he will choose them for Foreign Affairs or Communications, so they hold back. They keep their outrage ready to unleash should they become ministers, and they keep their scheming ready to unleash should the choice pass them by; and all the while they go about it by rumour, by broadcast, and by touting their own candidacy.

And if the Prime Minister imagines that this is the whole of the anxiety he has caused, he is gravely mistaken; for he has chosen silence after forming his ministry just as he chose it before forming it, and when he does speak he favours brevity and riddles, and when he acts he neither hurries nor hastens — and he bewilders those who hope and those who dread alike.

Those officials whom Sidqi Pasha and Ibrashi Pasha took as tools for spreading corruption and broadcasting injustice, for spreading tyranny, torturing people, shedding blood, and confiscating wealth — these officials are anxious too, or rather, say that they had been in despair; but when they saw the Prime Minister's silence and forbearance, their fear subsided and turned into a painful, gnawing anxiety, worse than fear itself. Will the Prime Minister dismiss them, or keep them on? And if he dismisses them, will he leave them to security, comfort, and well-being, or will he set them before the courts, to answer for the sins they committed and be called to account for the misdeeds they perpetrated? And if he keeps them, will he leave them where he found them, or will he transfer them from their posts, and then subject them to the same treatment officials receive in every variety of relegation, demotion, and banishment to those neglected corners in the chambers of government offices? Each of them is questioned, and each of them watches and waits; each of them reads the newspapers and burdens himself with interpretation, explanation, and analysis; reads between the lines, reads what is written and what is not written, hears what is said and what is not said; scans faces with the scrutiny of the desperate, seeking to reach into the depths of souls and discern what intentions consciences may hide; goes about offering congratulations, while ready for fierce hatred should harm befall him, and for fierce love should punishment pass him by. And these officials, too — those whom Sidqi Pasha and Ibrashi Pasha struck with every variety of injustice and persecution — are anxious as well: the

Prime Minister has promised them redress, but they do not know what form this redress will take, nor to what limit it will extend, nor on what basis it will rest. Is it restoration to the posts from which they were removed, or merely restoration to state service, nothing more? Is it a setting-right of what has been, or a setting-right of what is to come? Does it carry compensation for the harm they have borne, or is that compensation reserved for God, and not for the Prime Minister? And when will this redress come — will today's sun bring it as it rises, or tomorrow's sun bring it, or is it slow, loving deliberation as the Prime Minister loves it, and hating haste as the Prime Minister hates it? And these deputies and senators, who were told they would remain, and took heart, and then were told they would be dismissed, and lost heart, and now hang suspended between death and life — deputies and senators on paper only, and neither deputies nor senators in truth, since the Prime Minister has announced that he will abolish the electoral system and dissolve parliament.

Yes — but when will the system be abolished, and when will parliament be dissolved? And why does the Prime Minister contrive this cruelty, slow-roasting these people over a low flame, and prolong their suspension in this despair that is never quite free of hope, and this hopelessness that never quite recovers from expectation? Who knows — perhaps, if they were to recite the Grand 'Idiyya of Ya-Sin, on the Night of the Middle of Sha'ban, perhaps, if they were to visit certain graves and light candles about them, and distribute alms there; perhaps, if they were to seek the help of certain sorcerers, and masters of incantations and talismans, they might obtain one of those miracles that change the Prime Minister's mind, or come between him and what he wants! And what is to stop these senators and deputies from placing the Sheikh of Al-Azhar at their head, and going with him to visit al-Sayyid al-Anbabi, and Sayyida Sakina; and then what is to stop them from placing Ismail Sidqi Pasha at their head, and going with him to visit Saint Therese, that saint whose church stands in Shubra, and who is said to work wonders; and then, who knows, perhaps Ibrashi Pasha might prove more capable than the saints and holy men themselves of turning the Prime Minister back from what he intends. For Ibrashi Pasha is a man of boundless resource and fertile cunning, able to spend, and to spend without reckoning; and money is power — what a power it is! — so who knows, perhaps he can poison the very air; perhaps he is already at work on it; and perhaps he grants the Prime Minister this respite only so as to inform him, after a day or two, that abolishing the system is no such small or easy matter.

But then, the Sheikh of Al-Azhar — and what is the Sheikh of Al-Azhar? He has blessings both manifest and hidden; he has designs both plain and obscure; he can recite the Grand Recitation, and, following it, the famous supplication; he has means with the saints. Between him and al-Sayyid al-Adawi there are bonds known only to those firmly grounded in knowledge; he can spend a night of his nights awake in one of his chambers, releasing incense, and letting his tongue run with whatever words come easily — and behold, the system remains, safe from danger; and behold, the deputies and senators face no harm, and fear no misfortune; and behold, the dismissed scholars stay exactly where they are, advancing not at all, and perhaps even falling further behind... Do you see how the Prime Minister still disturbs the peace, burdening people with long toil and heavy care? Do you see how this anxiety the Prime Minister stirs up, and this scheming that anxiety produces, and this turmoil that plays havoc with so many people, are all of them fit to stir the attention of literary men, and to inspire in them splendid prose and brilliant verse — were they willing, or were they able; but they are neither willing nor able. So these opportunities will slip through their fingers; and how often opportunities slip through the fingers of literary men.