

Concerning Independence . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), October 25, 1934

We wish to speak of this very independence our own good-natured Prime Minister now stands guard over like some champion of heroes, defending it, protecting it from English interference — for it is, in actual truth, a peculiar sort of independence indeed, one that deserves no attention whatsoever, one no sensible man who holds himself above absurdity, and above the trifling amusements of children, ought ever to trouble himself with or give a moment's thought to. It is, in fact, an independence to which mere submission would be preferable, for it rests upon nothing but vanity, or upon sheer deception, and rests upon no clear, self-evident truth of the sort no reasonable person could ever dispute, or would ever need to dispute. The independence the Prime Minister protects, or makes such a show of protecting, does not even rise to the level of a mere form, a mere appearance, a mere false semblance of the thing. It is, rather, mere words released idly into the air — words from which not even the cleverest of men, nor the most foolish, nor the shrewdest, nor even the most naive soul alive, could extract any actual meaning, or draw any actual conclusion whatsoever.

It is an independence that permits the ministers, in times of calm and quiet, to let the English into absolutely everything, drawing closer to them by every available means. It permits them to let English police clubs and whips do their work upon the heads and bodies of Egyptians. It permits them to exclude Egyptians from official posts in order to install Englishmen instead. It permits them to force the compulsory distribution of English-language textbooks upon students and pupils over the summer months. It permits them to issue no decision on any matter of foreign policy except upon English opinion and English counsel — indeed, upon nothing less than direct English command and English will. It permits them to accept memoranda from the English concerning irrigation, and concerning matters entirely unrelated to irrigation, purely domestic matters that ought to belong to Egypt alone. It permits them to curry favor with the High Commissioner by holding banquets in his honor throughout the country, even in the most purely rural districts, and to marshal crowds of Egyptians to greet him with cheers and applause the moment he steps down from his car, and to see him off with the very same cheers and applause the moment he climbs back into it. It permits them to elevate the English word above every other word, so long as

relations between themselves and the English remain agreeable, and to pay no heed whatsoever to whatever Egyptians themselves might say or do — indeed, to forbid Egyptians from saying or doing anything at all. And should some difficulty ever arise between themselves and the English for any reason whatsoever — whether from their own weakness of judgment, their own mismanagement, their own incapacity to face real crises, or their own failure to grasp what independence actually means — it is precisely then, and only then, that they suddenly cry out that independence stands in danger, and summon the people to protect it, to defend it, to rise up against it should the English ever dare assault it.

They now request of the English — as London's own official circles confirm — that they offer their counsel on the matter of the regency and the guardians of the throne, when the English ought never to have been consulted at all, let alone offer counsel on such a matter. And when the English do offer their counsel, these very men then deny ever having sought that counsel, complain of the very interference they themselves invited, and stir up a violent crisis whose consequences they cannot even begin to gauge — for they are simply incapable of gauging consequences in any matter whatsoever. This is the independence the Prime Minister protects, or makes such a show of protecting — an independence worse than mere submission, since it rests, as we have said, on vanity and deception, on an absurdity children themselves would find hard to stomach. And if you examine this independence from its own purely domestic angle, from the angle of the relationship between the government and the Egyptian people themselves, you will find it an independence steeped entirely in wrongdoing, entirely in violation of the law, entirely corrupting of what independence genuinely means. It is an independence built upon subjecting people to violence, to unjust oppression, and upon discriminating among them in the collection of taxes: leniency toward one's own supporters and allies, severity — indeed sheer exhaustion — inflicted upon one's opponents and those who resist. And it is squandering of the very money gathered by the club, collected by the whip, seized from people before its rightful time — squandering of this money to the right and to the left, squandering within Egypt and squandering abroad, squandering on things that might be useful and could easily wait, and on things of no use whatsoever, indeed of certain and demonstrable harm — a mere toying with public funds, exactly as children toy with the sand before them while playing on the seashore. And should the public ever object to any of this, or even contemplate objecting to it, the response is interrogation, investigation, exhaustion,

and countless forms of harassment, and boundless persecution, and an audacity that dares even to trample upon the very standing of the judiciary itself — a standing that ought by rights to be held sacred — along with countless other things besides, which we will not even attempt to enumerate here, since we could not possibly enumerate them all, things that leave every soul constricted, every heart bleeding, and every tongue crying out.

The independence the Prime Minister protects, or makes such a show of protecting, can genuinely be summed up in just two sentences: submission to the English, for as long as relations between the government and the English remain agreeable; and the degradation of the Egyptian people, for as long as the government proves capable of degrading them. Search as thoroughly as you like, investigate as deeply as you like — you will never manage to extract the Prime Minister's own version of independence from these two hideous images: the image of submission to the strong, and the image of degradation inflicted upon the weak. We would very much like to know, then, whether this is truly the independence Egyptians once demanded, once struggled for, once shed their own blood for, once exhausted their own souls for, once endured countless varieties of harm, injustice, and injury for. And we would very much like to know, too, for whose benefit this independence was actually declared.

And for whose interest, exactly? And to satisfy whom, exactly, was this independence declared? Was this independence declared for the benefit of al-Ibrashi Pasha and men of his kind — men whom events keep bringing to the surface in this wretched country — and for his own supporters and those ministers and quasi-ministers who bow obediently before him? If this independence was indeed declared for the benefit of these very men, rather than for the Egyptian people, then let them protect it entirely alone, let them keep it entirely to themselves, and let them leave the Egyptian people free to seek the genuine independence they have not yet actually won. Or was this independence instead declared for the Egyptian people themselves, to satisfy them, to secure their own interests, and to arrive at a genuine understanding between themselves and the English? If this latter possibility is the truth of the matter — and we believe, indeed we are convinced, that it is the truth, beyond any doubt — then the Egyptian people search for their own independence and cannot find it at all, finding instead that other men entirely — al-Ibrashi Pasha and men of his kind — have monopolized this

independence at the people's own expense, seizing these very rights entirely for themselves.

We do not believe Egyptians have sunk so deeply into absurdity as to actually believe that the independence of al-Ibrashi Pasha and men of his kind is somehow Egypt's own independence, or that the continued presence of al-Ibrashi Pasha and men of his kind in their posts — men who transgress the law and violate the sanctities of the constitution — somehow represents the genuine, true face of authentic independence.

No. Some segment of the public may well sink to such absurdity, since God has apparently willed it so for them — but the Egyptian people as a whole remain sound of judgment still, understand independence for exactly what it is, and want it in its true and genuine form. And they know full well that the true guardians and champions of independence neither are, nor could ever possibly be, men cut from the same cloth as al-Ibrashi Pasha and the Prime Minister himself.