

Rescue . . .

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

It is the right of the government-aligned newspapers, and especially the one that speaks for the Prime Minister, to thank God that they are not widely read and do not enjoy any great circulation, as people say — for if the public actually read the nonsense these papers publish for them, and the idle chatter they try to spread among them, the consequences would hardly be something to welcome or feel easy about.

Egyptian readers despise newspapers that fail to satisfy them and hold in contempt writers who neither reflect their views nor serve them honestly and faithfully. They content themselves with turning away from such papers and abandoning such writers — but they do not accept, nor should they ever accept, being mocked by the press, or having writers toy with their minds and their interests to the shameful degree the government papers have now reached.

Here is one of these papers, congratulating the government this very morning for having saved Egypt from two imminent dangers — saving it from the danger of flooding, and saving its capital from the danger of its sewer system.

And this paper is not content merely to congratulate the government and drown it in praise; it goes further, heaping fierce blame upon the government's opponents for failing to assist the government or to calm the public when the crisis struck, and likewise for failing to commend the government's efforts, to acknowledge its labors, or to give it proper credit now that the danger has passed and Egyptians are once again secure in life, in property, and in health generally.

Yes, this is the sort of thing written in certain newspapers, and those who write it can apparently rest easy with themselves, find peace with their own conscience, and look themselves in the mirror without flinching. We can perhaps understand why those who write such things feel no shame in facing the public — for in the public's eyes they are innocent enough, since the public does not read what they write and knows nothing of the nonsense they spout. But what we cannot understand, and cannot stomach, is how comfort and peace of mind and conscience can come so easily to people who permit themselves this toying with minds, this mockery played upon the public's very

intelligence — for no reason except their wish to please those who allow them to stave off the pain of hunger.

It is truly too much to ask of Egypt that among her own sons there should be one who would claim to her that the present government deserves praise for having saved Cairo from the danger of its sewer system, and for having spared its people the hideous filth that this danger stirs up, corrupting the air, filling it, polluting the water, and unleashing all of it upon the souls of the innocent.

It is truly too much to ask of Egypt that some of her sons should be capable of claiming to the people of Cairo that the government has saved them from this evil — when they see it with their own eyes, smell it with their own nostrils, are troubled by it when they wake, lie sleepless because of it when night falls, and live an entire existence of unrelenting vexation whether they leave their homes or remain within them — even as the ministers enjoy a life of calm and quiet, of soft and delightful luxury, on the beautiful shore of Alexandria.

It is truly too much to ask of Egypt that among her sons there should be one who glorifies the negligent man precisely as he drowns in negligence, who praises the slack man precisely as he sinks in slackness, and who demands of wretched Egyptians that they be content with their negligent ministers — and not merely content, but that they add to that contentment praise, gratitude, and commendation besides. Who knows — perhaps tomorrow they will ask Egyptians to hold prayers in the mosques and the churches, beseeching God to grant the ministers ever more blessing upon blessing, ever more luxury upon luxury, because they saved the people of Cairo from harm and warded off every misfortune from their lives and health!

Egyptians must truly have grown contemptible in the eyes of these writers, or else these writers must have grown truly contemptible in their own eyes — for such toying with the public mind could not come from these men unless they had either lost all sense of shame regarding themselves, or had come to hold their own nation in such low regard that they no longer hope for any dignity on her behalf.

We ourselves are most eager to praise the ministers and commend them, not to mention encouraging them and giving credit where credit is due — but we would like to see in them some achievement that actually deserves recording, some effort that actually warrants praise, some service that actually merits gratitude and appreciation. At the very least,

we would like to feel that they share with the people the crises that befall them, suffer alongside them the hardships they endure, and take upon themselves some portion of the misery that afflicts them. The public ought to feel that Egypt's ministers suffer alongside Egyptians and share their pain. We would like the public to know that the people of Cairo were not left to face this danger alone, to suffer it alone and dread it alone, but that the ministers and senior officials came and stayed among them, sharing in whatever they had to bear — and that the worst of the summer's burden eased, and Cairo's climate grew mild again, but for this poisoned air corrupted by the sewers. Let the ministers show us their solidarity with the people, their sincerity in that solidarity, and their eagerness to fulfill their duty — not, we mean, some general national duty, but the specific duty of their own office — by hurrying to the stricken and remaining among them. We would like to see this, so as to know that the ministers are of us, and we of them, that they feel our pain and share our suffering. But what do we actually see? We see the responsible minister paying Cairo the briefest of visits; we see the Prime Minister spending mere hours in Cairo; we see the other ministers recoiling from Cairo in dread, turning away from it altogether — God forgive us — indeed, we see the Director of the Ministry of Health himself residing in Alexandria, never once leaving it, overseeing Cairo from afar and safeguarding the lives of its people by telephone — and then demanding that the government's opponents lie to themselves and to the public, claiming that Cairo has been saved from danger, deceiving themselves and deceiving the public into crediting the ministers with an accomplishment they never achieved and a labor they never undertook — only to then turn around and praise the ministers for it, presenting them with bouquets and garlands of flowers.

The ministers ought to feel that the people of Cairo notice, with bitter pain, that their ministers enjoy the open air, the sweet breeze, the pleasant life, the beautiful sea, and boundless luxury, while the people themselves suffer what no one ought to suffer in this day and age, in a civilized country whose budget exceeds thirty million pounds, where taxes are collected without gentleness or leniency, and whose rulers claim to the public that the nation has attained the same level of progress as the civilized, advanced peoples across the sea.

The ministers ought to feel that the people of Cairo do not believe they truly share in their ordeal, or truly grieve for what has befallen them in this crisis — but rather believe that the ministers do not regard this

grave calamity as a national catastrophe at all, or are simply incapable of conceiving of a national catastrophe as such, and see it instead merely as a matter of orders issued, funds allocated, papers signed — followed by the conviction that duty has thereby been discharged, and that whoever has discharged his duty is entitled to enjoy comfort, luxury, and ease.

This is not how ministers discharge their duty in civilized nations, where human dignity is honored, where the rights of the people are safeguarded, and where the sanctities of life are respected.

The newspapers reported that the Prime Minister had wished to travel to Damietta aboard a ship gently rocking upon the Nile, but then thought better of it and postponed the trip — leading people to suppose he would come instead to Cairo with his colleagues, to remain there and personally oversee, at close hand, whatever measures were being taken to save the city. But it was not long before they discovered that the Prime Minister and his colleagues remained fixed in Alexandria, unmoving: some of them attended the Deputy High Commissioner's banquet on Wednesday; others among them will attend yet another banquet on Tuesday; and the rest await a third banquet, to which they will be invited on some third day — while the people of Cairo continue to suffer under these specters that haunt their air, morning and evening alike: the specters of the epidemic, and all that the epidemic brings in its wake. No — the government's newspapers ought not to demand that the government's opponents credit the ministers with an achievement or commend them for some labor they never performed. Rather, these papers ought to say to the ministers, to the senior officials, and to the Director of the Ministry of Health: "You have no place in Alexandria. Your place, your work, and your duties lie in Cairo, among its stricken people. Hurry back, then, from your summer retreat — for it seems that decency alone now forbids you from continuing to enjoy it."