

Wisdom...

al-Balagh, 20 January 1946

Our English friends must surely be entirely pleased with us — for we have conducted ourselves, within the assembly of the United Nations, in a manner bound to fill their hearts with contentment, and their souls with delight and joy. We conducted ourselves exactly as well-behaved, well-mannered children conduct themselves, children whose mothers have raised and disciplined them properly: they never depart from convention in public gatherings and assemblies, never raise their voices with a coarse word or otherwise, say only what they are meant to say, and always prefer silence to any speech whatsoever. Should they find themselves compelled to speak, they do so, but in a calm, measured tone, with a composed, dignified voice. Nor do they ever ask for anything, let alone insist upon asking for it — for it is neither good manners, nor a mark of complete upbringing, for children to ask their own families for anything in front of guests, let alone ask the guests themselves for anything. True manners, and true upbringing entirely, consist in children waiting calmly, peacefully, eyes lowered to the ground, smiling at those around them, saying nothing and asking for nothing until they are directly addressed — at which point their answer comes with proper courtesy and modesty — and until some treat is offered them, at which point their acceptance comes only after a great deal of hesitation and polite refusal, whatever their own heart and conscience genuinely desire underneath.

Such was our own conduct within the assembly of the United Nations. Had propriety itself not required us to speak, we would never have spoken at all — but the representatives of every other nation spoke, so we had to say something, had to let our own voice be heard, lest people take us for deaf-mutes or the blind. The assembly of the United Nations has, after all, granted us a real favour, done us a genuine kindness, taking us by the hand until it seated us in the Security Council itself — and it is the very least of good manners, the very least a proper upbringing requires, that we thank it for this favour, and acknowledge this kindness. So we spoke, then, exactly as everyone else spoke, so that it might be said we too had spoken; we spoke, then, to give thanks for the favour granted us, so that it might be said we are well-mannered and well-behaved; and we spoke, beyond all that, simply to hear the sound of our own voice, to know we remain genuinely capable of speech, and to

reassure ourselves that our own representatives abroad can indeed raise Egypt's own voice high among the voices of nations, her own head held proud among the heads of peoples. Were it not for our English friends' own strict discipline, their own firm resolve, their own economy of speech, and their own stinginess with praise, they would surely have granted us a great many of those sweet words expressing contentment, and depicting genuine appreciation. But our English friends prefer a stern, frowning countenance to any brightness or smile, fearing that, should they smile upon us, and show their own contentment with our conduct at the United Nations assembly, we might grow covetous of them, and grow bold against them.

The English are, after all, genuinely skilled educators, true masters of pedagogy — more skilled, indeed, than Egypt's own Ministry of Education, more accomplished than the Egyptian Minister of Education's own advisers. For this very reason, they take care never to smile upon us, even when we genuinely deserve a smile, nor show any contentment with us, even when we genuinely deserve their contentment. Had we allies other than the English, and had we conducted ourselves toward them in this same gentle, charming manner, they would never have withheld a smile from us, never grudged us their own praise, never hesitated to offer us all manner of sweets and fruit, in genuine appreciation of this well-mannered, well-behaved, charming conduct of ours.

Things are known by their opposites. Look, then, at Iran: her own representative had scarcely begun speaking before he stirred up a fierce war of words against Russia, occupying the United Nations assembly with himself and his own homeland, occupying the telegraph, the radio, and the writers of newspapers and magazines with himself and his own homeland too. Look, too, at the representatives of Syria and Lebanon: they gave warning they would say something, and people fell to waiting to hear what they would say — and then they spoke, and said exactly what they wished to say, and the representatives of other nations listened to them with real care, with real attention; the telegraph and the radio occupied themselves with them, and the writers of newspapers and magazines made a real celebration of them. They troubled France and Britain, without any doubt, exactly as Iran's own representative troubled the great Russian state. As for us, we enjoyed a truly great share of generous manners, and an abundant portion of the finest, most excellent upbringing. We said nothing at all, troubled no one at all, occupied neither telegraph, nor post, nor newspaper, nor magazine, with ourselves

— we merely stole our own moment to speak, and let it pass over the assembly the way a calm, cool breeze passes over people in the scorching heat that melts bodies and exhausts hearts.

It is only right that we thank our own Foreign Minister for having represented us, and represented us so well, showing the assembly of the United Nations that Egypt is well-mannered, well-behaved, delicate and graceful, never wishing to trouble anyone, always preferring, instead, to remain light-hearted and sweet-spirited, even when calamities befall her, and trials weigh heavily upon her. It is only right that we thank our own Foreign Minister for representing us so well, for expressing us so truthfully, and for so precisely depicting our own character, our own manners, our own refined conduct, and our own contented hearts.

But our own Foreign Minister ought not to monopolize this gratitude alone — he has partners in it, no less deserving of credit, no less worthy of praise. The Foreign Minister does not, after all, speak for himself; he says only what he is instructed to say. He is the government's own tongue, a mirror held up to the Council of Ministers. If he has represented us so well, so skilfully expressing our own character, our own manners, our own contented souls, our own untroubled hearts, then the credit for this belongs not to him alone, but to our own Prime Minister first, to our own Council of Ministers second, and to our own Foreign Minister only last of all.

Had our own Prime Minister wished it, and his fellow ministers wished it alongside him, we would have had a sharper tongue than Iran's own, would have troubled others more than Syria and Lebanon did. But we are a well-mannered, well-behaved people: our own affairs are settled in our absence, and we raise no objection; our own affairs are settled before our very eyes, and we lodge no protest. Manners forbid us objection; upbringing forbids us protest. We are the builders of civilization, the raisers of the Pyramids, the teachers of humanity — we have milked time of both its halves, tasted its sweetness and its bitterness, tried it thoroughly, and tried it well. Wisdom issued forth from us before India ever knew it, before Greece ever knew it, before the modern world ever knew it. For this very reason, we prefer silence, since silence is golden, and leave speech to others, since speech is merely silver — and the wise always prefer gold to silver, and always prefer silence to speech.

We know full well that Iran's own protest will never drive Russia out of Azerbaijan, and that Syria and Lebanon's own protest will never drive the British and French from Syrian and Lebanese soil. Why, then, should we object, knowing full well that objection will accomplish nothing? Why should we protest, knowing full well that protest has never turned away anything unwelcome? Only those with no real share of wisdom, no real portion of experience, ever speak, protest, and object. But we, who taught humanity wisdom itself, who showed it how to profit from experience, ought never to speak, except once we are entirely certain our own speech will actually be of use, or do some genuine good.

Do you see, now, that our own Foreign Minister represented not merely our own manners and character, but our own wisdom, our own good sense, our own sound understanding of affairs, our own sound management of circumstances, our own sound judgment of things and of people? And, in fairness, the Egyptian people are indeed indignant and grieved, wishing our own Foreign Minister had followed the path of our own Syrian, Lebanese, and Iranian brothers. But the Egyptian people are not privy to the true facts of things, as ministers are privy to them, nor able to weigh their own finer points, as ministers weigh them; and there is, in the people, a certain impulsiveness genuinely worth restraining, a certain extremism genuinely worth tempering into moderation. It is enough for the people to know that Divine Providence has placed their own fate and future as a trust in the Prime Minister's own hands, and that the Prime Minister is the very best possible bearer of this trust, more capable of carrying it, indeed, than the heavens, the earth, and the mountains themselves. The people need do nothing, then, but rest easy, and sleep soundly, so long as the Prime Minister and his own colleagues remain the bearers of this trust, shouldering its own burdens.

It is only fair to say that some among our own wise men, our own sensible people, our own men of opinion, and our own seasoned scholars, would indeed have wished our own Foreign Minister, in London, had followed the same path taken by other ministers of the Near and Middle East.

Sidqi Pasha, for instance, is neither satisfied nor at ease — but Sidqi Pasha is a difficult man, with no way of ever truly satisfying him. Let him remain indignant today, then, for he will grow satisfied tomorrow regardless; he is, after all, not the emissary of Divine Providence in these particular days. There is nothing left for him to do but rest easy, and sleep soundly, exactly as the people rest easy, and sleep soundly.

It is only fair, too, to note that one of our own ministers is genuinely consumed by anxiety over this matter, an anxiety that spoils his own life, drives him outside the bounds of cabinet solidarity, and compels him toward public denunciation and outcry. But none of this ought to alarm us, or trouble us in the slightest. This anxious, sympathetic minister only threw himself into this anxiety and sympathy precisely because the matter was never actually in his own hands — had he himself been in London, he would have spoken exactly as our Foreign Minister spoke, would have proven himself exactly as light-hearted, exactly as sweet-spirited, in our English friends' own eyes. It appears, in fact, that our own ministers prefer to show the English nothing of themselves, or of their own homeland, but this same light-heartedness and sweetness of spirit — reserving, for their own fellow Egyptians, an entirely different set of qualities: harsh severity, coarse speech, a bitter tongue, overbearing authority, and sharp menace. And they have every right in the world to act this way: they find themselves compelled to be gentle with the English, since the English can only ever be won over through gentleness, and compelled to be harsh with Egyptians, since Egyptians, apparently, can only ever be won over through harshness and force. When they deal with the English, they are men of diplomacy, and diplomacy calls for tact, grace, and gentleness; when they deal with Egyptians, they are men of education and discipline, and discipline calls for firmness, education for resolve alone. What wonder is there, then, in our own ministers proving lions toward us, and beautiful gazelles toward our English allies and friends?

As for the rest — it is high time this Egyptian people came to know itself, and to properly value its own life, filling its own heart with the firm conviction that it was created to be governed against its own will, to have its own affairs managed against its own liking, and to submit to ministers upon whom Divine Providence has cast the burdens of governance, so that they might bear them, answerable for them to nothing but their own conscience, and to that same Divine Providence which chose them. And their own conscience remains content and at ease — the clearest proof of this being that they change nothing whatsoever of their own conduct. And that same Divine Providence which chose them remains pleased with them — the clearest proof of this being that it has not yet removed them from their own posts of power. We Egyptians built civilization, and spread wisdom throughout the world — so it would hardly do for us now to abandon that very wisdom which teaches us to listen, and to obey, whatever the circumstances, and whatever calamities befall us.

Success belongs to whoever flies on his own wings, or whoever surrenders and finds real rest. We Egyptians, though, do not know how to fly, since we possess no wings at all — or since our own wings have not yet grown their own feathers!

Let us, then, be patient, until God brings about a matter already decreed.