

Wretchedness

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1 But it stirs no mercy in the heart, rouses no compassion there, just as it stirs no delight in the soul, nor kindles any joy in it. It is nothing but a bleak, gloomy wretchedness, dark to the utmost, black in the deepest black, the kind that traces upon faces a smile a frown would serve better than. And where is that Egyptian heart that could show mercy to this man, who held power for more than three years, and grew harsh and overbearing, grew tyrannical and proud, and showed mercy to no Egyptian, indeed never once let the Egyptians' mercy find a path to his heart?

2 And where is that Egyptian heart that could pity this man, who was granted the means of strength and never turned them to any good, who was given the means of benefit and used them for nothing but himself, and for a circle of dependents who knew how to keep faith with him, remain devoted to him, and acknowledge his favors? No sooner had misfortune befallen him than most of them turned from him, averted; the few who came to him came with tainted hearts and crooked souls, lukewarm men, and he had scarcely tested and tried them before he knew there was no good in them.

3 And where is that Egyptian soul that could delight in the wretchedness of this man, who could have done good and chose harm instead, who could have been useful and chose injury instead, who could have stood toward his nation as a faithful, sincere servant, and did nothing but stand toward it as an obstinate adversary, diminishing its rights, violating its sanctities, and squandering its interests?

4 And where is that Egyptian soul that could rejoice at the fall of this Egyptian, who might have been a truthful soldier, bold and earnest in Egypt's victory, in defending her, in clearing her path and removing the obstacles from it, and did nothing but set her back years, strew thorns before her, load her with burdens of harm, make her taste every variety of torment, and drive her to wish he had never been one of her sons, had never been known to her public life, had never been forced upon her by circumstance?

5 Yes, there exists no Egyptian heart that shows mercy to this man or pities him, and there exists no Egyptian soul that delights in his fall or rejoices at the abandonment that has befallen him; for he was too harsh toward his nation to deserve mercy from his nation, and he now means too little to his nation to deserve her concern over whatever harm befalls him or misfortune assails him.

6 He is a stranger, though he dwells in his own country, alone, though he lives among his family and his companions; for he chose for himself a way of life that split his heart from the heart of the homeland, and set his own self apart from his fellow citizens, so that they know nothing of him except when they recall or witness the harm he has done them and the wrong he has committed against them, and they disown him except when they wish to take warning from the fate of tyrants who go too far in tyranny, and the end of the unjust when they drown themselves in injustice, aggression, and transgression.

7 This political death agony, into which this man was forced, was a long one, until his political death overtook him yesterday. It was long, heavy, arduous, harsh; watch him, from the moment he fell from the seat of power, wrestling with political death in a fierce, sharp, unsteady struggle, made up of rising and falling, of advancing and drawing back, of vigor and languor.

8 Watch him as he sets about resisting, then surrenders to weakness, then resumes resistance, then cowers and sinks, then rouses himself for battle, then takes refuge in peace, then gathers his strength and whatever intelligence, competence, and skill remain to him to deliver his last speech at the stranger's banquet, and then faintness overtakes him and dissolution seizes him. And while some remnant of strength, some measure of vigor, still stirred in him, he gave up what he had aspired to in the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies, and was defeated before his peaceable rival Dr. Raafat Pasha, and before his enemy, the good-natured Abd al-Fattah Yahya Pasha; then weakness ran through him, rising from his feet to his head, or descending from his head to his feet, until yesterday he breathed his last in two letters, raising one to his rival the president of the Chamber of Deputies, and raising the second to his enemy the prime minister.

9 Then people look, and find the embers have died down, the lamp has gone out, and that fierce vigor, that formidable strength, that vast cunning, that boundless daring — all of it has scattered to the corners of

the void, and become dust the wind carries off, and nothing remains of his political life but talk — and what talk! Talk that satisfies no one, that pleases no one, talk that time itself would wish deafness upon, so as not to hear it, talk that the days would wish forgetfulness upon, so that it be wiped clean from their memory, talk that Egypt shrinks from, because it touches one of her own sons.

10 Yes, nothing remains of this man's political life but this wretched talk, which every person and every thing would wish carried off on the wind, as its owner's strength and might were carried off; but God will have it that time hear it nonetheless, that the days retain it nonetheless, that Egyptians preserve it and pass it on nonetheless. Their generations will inherit it as a lesson, a warning, and an exemplary punishment for those whom advantage tempts, whom appetite seduces, whom passion and greed drive to bend their path in political life awry, to hold the people's rights up to mockery, and to make the people's trust and the people's sanctities mere matter for idle talk.

11 Yes; but if this political life left the Egyptians this warning, it also left this man himself an inheritance that he would give his very nose and ear to have the thickest veils and the densest curtains cast between himself and it. Watch him, driven from the field of rivalry, withdrawn into his house in Cairo, or into one of the many houses scattered across his vast lands and broad estates, alone with himself. Watch him, gloomy, troubled in mind, terrified in soul, frightened at heart, bewildered of gaze, at ease with nothing and with no one, and with nothing and no one at ease with him.

12 If he turns his gaze about any of the rooms in which he shuts himself away, he sees these vast, terrifying phantoms, encircling him, stirring around him, with a mournful moan that would tear the hardest of hearts and shatter the toughest of livers — the phantoms of those whose blood was spilled, whose lives were taken, during those black years he spent in Egypt monopolizing power.

13 Watch him: these phantoms so terrify and unsettle him that he shuts his eyes, and turns his gaze inward, into the depths of his own soul, wishing to look there instead. And what a bottomless abyss it is, astir with the phantoms of sorrow and grief, the shapes of despair and regret, the forms of anguish and terror, so that he is terrified of himself, terrified of what surrounds him, and wanders out of his rooms in search of rest and safety across his broad lands and open spaces, but he escapes no fear

except into another fear, escapes no sorrow except into another sorrow, is freed from no distress except to plunge into another distress; these phantoms follow him wherever he goes, these shapes circle him wherever he settles, these forms fill his heart whenever he wakes, and these apparitions toy with his soul whenever he sleeps!

14 He looks upon his fellow citizens, and looks at them only with caution; his fellow citizens look upon him, and look at him only with distaste. Watch him, driven from the field in disgrace, unable even to enjoy what a proud man defeated still enjoys of dignity and pride. Watch him, grown too slight for his own supporters, so that not one of them troubles himself over him. Watch him, grown too slight for his rivals, so that not one of them pays him any heed. Watch him, having resigned yesterday from the People's Party, though he founded the People's Party, and from the Chamber of Deputies, though he was its dean; and there, the People's Party men, the deputies, and the senators gather around some table in some hotel, eat and drink and make speeches and disperse, and not one of them so much as mentions this man, not one of them so much as alludes to him — though there is not one among them who does not owe this man a favor, not one among them for whom this man has not done some good turn.

15 But he had offered them these favors and done them these good turns as the price for the aid and support he asked of them. He bought from them, and they sold to him, and then the transaction concluded, and buyers and sellers went their separate ways, and each of them disowned the other, and drew the curtain over whatever ties had bound them.

16 Watch him, confined to his house, with no partisans seeking him out and no rivals fearing him. Watch him wandering the length and breadth of Egypt, with no one hastening to meet him and no one fearing his wandering. He is not the man for whom the country arms itself, not the man before whom trenches are dug and barricades raised, not the man for whom police and army lie in watch, not the man whom the interior minister carries off in a swift train. He is nothing but a small, slight, negligible man, neither hoped for nor feared, neither a source of hope nor of despair, a man in the merely physical sense of the word, no more and no less.

17 Is it not strange that all Egyptians should watch this tragedy, and all bear witness to this lesson, and yet there should still remain among them men whose souls aspire to climb this lofty edifice, the edifice of

tyranny, only to plunge from it as yesterday's tyrant plunged? Indeed it is strange, but man is weak, and his weakness still costs him these wonders.

18 You see, then, that we were not mistaken when we judged that Sidqi Pasha's repentance before the prime minister would avail him nothing, and that his rivals would be satisfied with nothing less than his cutting every tie between himself and politics, leaving the party and leaving parliament, and devoting himself to his health and his rest. But what, one wonders, could this formidable force be, that drove this man out of politics after he had clung to it, held fast to it, despite events and troubles, despite long illness and heavy toil?

19 It is not the prime minister's own strength, for the prime minister is a good-natured man, incapable of such a thing, and aspiring to no such thing. It is rather the strength of circumstances, which kept in store for Sidqi Pasha harm enough to frighten him, unsettle him, and force him to prefer idleness and the laying down of arms, and to content himself, after this long adventure, with emerging from it safe in his own skin, wealthy, abundantly rich, able to live a life of ease. And the prime minister is, without doubt, too intelligent, too skilled, too aware of the truth of things to boast, or exult, or take credit for the defeat that has befallen his rival; for it was not the prime minister who struck Sidqi Pasha down when the blow fell — it was God who struck, and the arrows of God always strike true, never missing their mark, never straying from their intended course.

20 And if we may wish anything for the prime minister, this good-natured man, we wish that he hold himself, and that circumstances hold him, above whatever drove Sidqi Pasha to what he came to; and the prime minister knows full well how to turn aside from the path Sidqi Pasha took, the path that ended for him in this bleak wretchedness. And has the prime minister any way to turn aside from that path except to resign — thereby granting others rest, and finding rest himself?