

The Era of Abasement and Disgrace

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Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), November 7, 1934

Yes, it was an era of abasement and disgrace, this era that Abdel Fattah Yehia Pasha's resignation brought to a close yesterday — indeed, it was an era of something uglier still than abasement and disgrace, if the words people use could point to the truth of things beyond these familiar terms. Nor was it an era of abasement and disgrace measured against the governed rather than the governors; rather, the governors' share of abasement and disgrace was many times greater than the governed's share. And what do you make of men who abased people, seized them with oppression and tyranny, subjected them to injury and every variety of degradation — issuing in none of it from a free will, nor a chosen power, nor a hand capable of extending itself of its own accord, nor from any opinion or thought of their own, but simply dictated to: told to be harsh, and harsh they became; told to be men of harm, and men of harm they became; commanded to strength, and strong they were; commanded to violence, and weak they proved — so that the moment their masters abandoned them, the moment their protectors and handlers turned away, they were nothing; less than nothing.

They were told: you are the ministers — and they believed they were ministers. Then they were told: but you must obey — and they believed they must obey. They were told: this comes from al-Ibrashi Pasha — and at times they submitted to it, humbled. They were told: this comes from the English — and at other times they yielded to it, subdued. They were chaff, which, left to itself, the wind would have scattered, carried off in every direction — but it was never left to itself; al-Ibrashi Pasha gathered it together, al-Ibrashi Pasha scattered it apart, al-Ibrashi Pasha disposed of it as he pleased and wished. It assembled when assembly was wanted of it, dispersed when dispersal was wanted of it, went to the right, went to the left, pliant to whatever was wanted of it, obedient to whatever came down upon it. And this chaff, with neither substance nor cohesion, is what governed Egypt for a year and part of a year. It is what made Egyptians taste every shade of abasement, poured upon Egyptians every variety of disgrace; it is what exposed Egyptian lives to danger and Egyptian bodies to torment; it is what squandered Egyptian money without accounting, and threw away Egyptian interests without

hesitation, without reserve, without caution. The head of this chaff was in Paris, taking his ease and his leisure, when he was told: take up the premiership — and he flew, asking no questions, seeking no inquiry, consulting no one, making no investigation, simply flying, deflected by nothing. The ship stopped for him partway along its route, and he flung himself aboard headlong.

Then the ship brought him to the port, where others had to pull him bodily from it; then a car flew him to his house, then to the palace; then he emerged from the palace as head of the cabinet — and what a cabinet! Head of a body of men he had not chosen and who had not chosen him, whom he had not consulted and who had not consulted him, with whom he had held no discussion and who had held none with him — they were simply imposed upon him and he upon them. Al-Ibrashi Pasha had gathered them all, from right and left, then set one of their own number over them, then dispatched them wherever he wished to dispatch them, and they went where they were meant to go, moved as they were meant to move; they were let loose upon this people's life and corrupted it utterly, upon this people's wealth and squandered it recklessly, upon this people's public institutions, and did with them what they did. They were told: be excessive in force against the Egyptians — and they were excessive. They were told: be excessive in weakness before the English — and they were excessive. Their affairs settled into a pattern of savagery toward the weak and surrender to the strong. They spent a year and part of a year going out each morning to their offices and returning each evening to their houses, imagining they were directing affairs — or knowing they were directing nothing at all, and were merely instruments taken up for a purpose willed elsewhere. God alone can reckon the evil they committed; God alone can count the sins they perpetrated — not against Egypt alone, but against themselves as well. For they abased Egyptians every day, but they abased themselves every moment; they held Egyptians in contempt when morning came, but they held themselves in contempt waking and sleeping alike. They left their own wills at the doors of the ministries, and entered the ministries possessing no will of their own — and who knows, perhaps they are recovering their wills again now, having been forced bodily out of those ministries, brought down bodily from their seats of power. And the strange thing is that they went about their business as though they were working, delivered speeches as though they were thinking and speaking — when in truth it was al-Ibrashi Pasha who worked, al-Ibrashi Pasha who spoke, and they were merely instruments through which al-Ibrashi Pasha acted,

tongues through which al-Ibrashi Pasha uttered his words. They were told: be constitutional ministers — and they said, yes, what is to stop us from being constitutional ministers? And one among them said: but what shall we do about Sidqi Pasha, who resents us because he resents our master al-Ibrashi Pasha, and who may well stir up Parliament against us, since he commands the majority there? They were told: fear nothing, grieve over nothing, Parliament will come round to you as it once came round to Sidqi Pasha before you — only stand firm, put on a show of resistance, affect the cunning of statesmen and the guile of ministers. And they said: yes, what is to stop us from doing all this — indeed we came to do all this, and more than all this. Then they took to speaking, took to delivering speeches, took to opposing — yet they neither spoke nor delivered speeches nor opposed anything; it was al-Ibrashi Pasha, behind them, who spoke, delivered speeches, opposed. Then they looked, and found Parliament had fallen into line behind them,

and found Sidqi Pasha disgraced before them and fled in retreat. From that day on they took to going to Parliament and withdrawing from Parliament, giving people the impression they were constitutional ministers, while knowing themselves to be the ministers of one single man — until, when the great external problems arose and al-Ibrashi Pasha proved unable to resolve them, they too proved unable to resolve them. They were told: leave that to the English — and they said, yes, what is to stop us from leaving that to the English? So they handed the matter over to the English, in religious affairs, in the Mixed Courts, in the Capitulations. Then the King's illness grew heavy upon him. Al-Ibrashi Pasha grew alarmed, and they grew alarmed with him, and it was suggested to their chief that he consult the English, and he said: yes, what is to stop me from consulting the English? And when they had advised him, he accepted the advice and promised to carry it out. Then God favored Egypt with an improvement in His Majesty's health, and the matter slipped from al-Ibrashi Pasha's hands, slipped from the Prime Minister's hands as well, and the men were told: show resistance to the English — and they said, yes, what is to stop us from showing resistance to the English? Then they were told: deny that you sought the English's counsel — and they said, yes, what is to stop us from denying that we sought the English's counsel? Then matters grew serious in earnest, calamities crowded in, disasters loomed, and they were told: deny that there is anything in the air — and they said, yes, what is to stop us from denying that there is anything in the air? Then came the warning sign, and al-Ibrashi Pasha stood at the very edge of the abyss, and they were

told: sacrifice some of your colleagues — and they said, yes, what is to stop us from sacrificing some of our colleagues?

Then nothing remained between al-Ibrashi Pasha and the abyss but the moving of his foot, and they were told: resign — and they said, yes, what is to stop us from resigning? And yesterday they submitted their resignation to the occupant of the throne.

These are the men who governed Egypt for a year and part of a year; these are the men who imagined they governed Egypt; these are the men who gave people the illusion that they governed Egypt — while God bears witness that they had no part in governing Egypt, small or great. They were mere images, and the images have vanished; mere shadows, and the shadows have been erased; they were merely giving form to what the Egyptian Gazette called the setting of an era — and now this era has set, its traces have faded, and the Egyptians are turning to greet a new era, moving toward it whatever the circumstances, whatever resistance may come from those grown accustomed to the era of abasement and disgrace.

Here we are, hearing now that the cabinet was offered to Maher Pasha — only to hear, soon after, that it was withdrawn from him, because Maher Pasha is a man of this same era, and his taking up power would only preserve this era; and this era cannot survive, even if jinn and men together conspired to keep it alive. Should it resist, should it persist in its obstinacy, it must vanish all the same — and sooner than the obstinate imagine. Then here we are, hearing that the cabinet was offered to His Excellency Tawfiq Nessim Pasha, who asked for time to think before declaring refusal or acceptance. All Egyptians rejoiced when they heard the name of this man, who once repudiated the era of abasement and disgrace, who sacrificed his own position for the sake of his convictions — who, appointed a member of the Senate, resigned rather than break an oath he had sworn, as others broke theirs, and rather than bear burdens he himself had advised should not be borne. It is no wonder Egyptians should rejoice to see him proposed for the cabinet. But we read in the newspapers that the cabinet is being offered to him on condition that he preserve the present system. It is as though the cabinet were being offered to him only to be turned away from him — for the man holds himself in too much honor to repudiate a position he took with honor, to undertake something he himself once refused, to disappoint the people's hope in him and give the lie to the people's opinion of him, closing his political life with what no honorable man

would consent to close his political life with.

Indeed, we read in the papers the strangest talk — it is said that Ziwar Pasha proposed to Nessim Pasha that he work with the sitting Parliament, so long as he trusted it. Blessed be God! And what is there to prevent Parliament from trusting Nessim, when it trusted Abdel Fattah just as it trusted Sidqi? Indeed, what is there to prevent Parliament from trusting whichever leader or statesman you please, if the cabinet is entrusted to whichever leader or statesman you please?

Is al-Ibrashi Pasha's finger still at work in the shaping of cabinets? For this talk, if true, portrays al-Ibrashi Pasha's own character more faithfully than anything else could. This strange situation, however, will not last long; this very day will not pass before the first steps of this new crisis become clear. Either Nessim Pasha accepts the formation of the cabinet — in which case the present era has confessed defeat and surrendered to its fate — or Nessim Pasha declines to form the cabinet — in which case the present era still resists, still hopes to survive, though it resists to no purpose and hopes where there is no room for hope. For the people who wore down Sidqi Pasha's authority and Abdel Fattah Pasha's authority through patience, through pride, through contempt for tyranny and tyrants, will wear down the authority of any other minister who dares to take up the burdens of power in contempt of the nation's will, ready to take direction and dictation, to act on command, and to submit to men who answer to no one. Let us wait, then — our wait will not be long.

Taha Hussein

Al-Wadi, November 7, 1934.