

Gratitude

Taha Hussein

Kawkab al-Sharq, 30 November 1933

But it differs from one man to another: some give thanks with the pen, and some give thanks with the club, and whatever you do, you will change nothing in people's natures, and alter nothing, great or small, in the substance of their souls; all you can do is record what you observe of it, and draw people's attention to it, so that they may learn where the good lies and where the evil lies, and come to see where wisdom lies and where folly lies. I read today's papers and see this strange contradiction between two ministers who work in a single ministry toward a single end, on a single program, under a single chief: one gives the people thanks and praises them, and the other strikes the people and goes to great lengths in mistreating them, and both are Egyptian, and both were placed in their posts to serve Egyptians, not to lord over them, to benefit Egyptians, not to harm them, to obey Egyptians, not to command them, and to bow to the will of Egyptians, not to seize them and bend them to his own will.

Here is the minister of war, thanking the nation in the most beautiful terms and praising it in the finest praise, because it showed love for the army, tenderness toward it, and sympathy with it, when it accompanied the two great martyrs to their rest with its hearts, its bodies, and its tongues, and he says he is unable, or declares himself unable, to convey what fills his heart of gratitude and satisfaction, of appreciation and esteem. And here is the interior minister, mustering against the nation forces of police and army in a muster the nation had not seen the like of, according to Al-Ahram, but once before since the revolution, and then unleashing this massed force upon the nation, so that clubs and whips fall upon its sons without reckoning, without mercy, without pity, without regard for sanctity, without respect for right, without shame before the majesty of death. If you can find me a way to reconcile these two ministers, who work together and stand in solidarity with one another, then you are gifted indeed in understanding and inquiry; as for me, were it not that this is an occasion of grief and sorrow, an occasion of anguish and regret, an occasion of admonition and reflection, I would invite you to laugh at this contradiction, for laughter is the best response to so strange a contradiction as this. Which of the two ministers should the nation believe — should it believe the one who thanks it with the tip of his pen or

the edge of his tongue, or believe the one whose men strike it as slaves used to be struck, setting clubs and whips upon it as they are set upon beasts? Or should it believe neither the one nor the other — for this one gives thanks because official duty forces him to give thanks, and that one fails to protect the people from being struck because the pretense of strength, the effort to remain in power, and the desire to display authority force him not to protect them; and had the first been left to himself, he would neither have thanked nor praised anyone, for this very nation, gathered in mourning yesterday, was resentful of him and of his ministry, averse to him and to his ministry, showing plainly, in a way that pleased itself and wounded his rivals, that its affection and its heart, its devotion and its love, lay not with him or with his ministry, but with other men, men who once strove alongside him shoulder to shoulder, once breathed the same air with him, once witnessed with him scenes of love and devotion, of aversion and rejection, once heard with him the cries of support and the cries of protest, and once felt, truthfully, that they represented this nation, while he felt that he represented no one but himself and this small band he counts, who profess solidarity with him, each going his own way, twisting for no one and for nothing.

And had the second been left to himself, he would have chosen safety and preferred peace, for he knows full well, and believes most firmly, that these people are stronger than he is, mightier than he is, more capable than he is of protecting their own bodies from the fall of clubs, and their own faces from the touch of whips, were it not that they want no harm done, were it not that they are too patriotic and too wise to bear what he bears in the way of blame for assault and defiance of order.

Yes, and he knows full well that he was placed in his post for no other reason than to be a faithful, sincere, obedient servant to these very masses upon whom he unleashed suffering yesterday, and he knows full well that, left to himself, he would have conducted himself among these masses as a sincere, faithful servant should, because he is incapable of conducting himself among them in any other way. But that minister was compelled to give thanks, and this minister was compelled to accept the beating, because these men do not act, in what they do, of their own accord alone, but act instead out of other things they know full well, things that drive them to what they would rather not do. I cannot bring myself to think that the interior minister, left alone with himself, with the pretense between him and his conscience lifted, would see the beating of people, their torture, and the seizure from them of the simplest

expressions of freedom, as something a noble man could approve of, or something for which a faithful minister could be praised — but these are the necessities of politics, which sometimes impose on people more than they can bear. I cannot bring myself to think that matters have come to such a point with the interior minister that he now believes he has the right to loose the hand of the police upon the people to this degree, so that they look upon the sons of Egypt as the owner of an animal looks upon his animal, in countries where no societies exist for the prevention of cruelty to animals. And I would maintain, for my own part, that the interior minister, left alone with himself, meets from himself a fierce reproach, and that, speaking with his own conscience, he feels from it a painful sting, for the interior minister is an Egyptian, whatever else may be said of him, and Egyptians are dearer to the interior minister than to have clubs set upon their bodies without right and without the law's sanction — but the interior minister wishes to remain a minister, and it appears that the humiliation of Egyptians, or silence in the face of their humiliation, is the price that must be paid to hold on to his ministry in these days. I force my rebellious soul to laugh, and to drown itself in laughter, when I picture the ministers gathered yesterday after escorting the two martyrs to their rest, discussing how this noble, wretched nation had wished to accompany its two dead, to show its appreciation of them, its tenderness toward them, its esteem for sacrifice and for those who sacrifice themselves in duty's and country's cause, and how it met, at the hands of police and army, such horror as it met, so that some of its sons were struck down, some of its sons were bereaved, and more than seventy of them were carried off to have their wounds tended and their pains soothed. And so the interior minister is praised, for he preserved order, secured public safety, and won the battle, and did not allow this people to accomplish what it wished in fulfilling its duty, or to declare what it wished in honoring duty and exalting those who discharge it well. Then the minister of war speaks up to say that, in spite of all this, and notwithstanding all this, he will issue a statement in which he will not stint the nation a word of thanks unmatched by any other thanks, and praise unrivaled by any other praise.

Yes, I loathe my own rebellious soul for laughing, and drowning itself in laughter, when I picture the ministers gathered yesterday after the tragedy, exchanging these very words among themselves; for these words, and what they reveal of souls and feelings, of leanings and passions, truly show that our affairs are not conducted in earnest, and that our ministers do not look upon us as ministers ought to look upon the

peoples they serve, but look upon us instead as masters look upon slaves — and yet, were it not for us, they would never have become masters, and were it not for us, they would be nothing at all.

The commandant of Cairo issued his statement the day before yesterday, asking the people to be careful to preserve order, so that the occasion might keep the solemnity and majesty it deserves; and we, in turn, asked the commandant of Cairo to draw his own men's attention to exactly what he draws the people's attention to, to ask of his men exactly what he asks of the people, and to preserve order himself, restraining the police from breaking it — for the nation is no less anxious than the government that the occasion should keep the solemnity and majesty it deserves. And those papers that belong to no party, that voice no party's opinions, and that do not stint the government their sympathy and support, declare that it was the police who committed the assault, and that this assault is what corrupted the order of the occasion and squandered much of the solemnity and majesty it deserved. So it is one of two things, and no third: either the police assaulted the people because they were incapable of preserving order except by assault, or the police assaulted the people because they were ordered to assault them and driven to it — and the responsibility, in either case, is graver than the commandant supposes, graver than the interior minister supposes; and yet it will still go to waste, because the rights and sanctities of Egyptians weigh too lightly with these gentlemen who govern for them to respect, in dealing with these rights, the rulings of constitution and law, and because the minds of Egyptians are held too cheaply by these gentlemen who govern for them to be met by ministers with anything but this strange contradiction: one minister giving thanks with the pen, and one minister giving thanks with the club, and Egyptians being obliged to accept the pen's thanks and to submit to the club's thanks — and the prime minister, that decent, upright man, who loves his country most dearly, and who formed his ministry for no purpose but to distribute justice among people fairly, swayed neither by passion nor by bias, sits content, pleased, and delighted. And what distribution of justice could come closer to fairness than for the ministers to divide the matter among themselves in this manner: one minister wounding with club and weapon, and one minister healing with thanks and praise.