

Peril . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), September 14, 1934

This is the peril that has beset Cairo these past few days. Its first signs appeared on Saturday; the minister learned of it on Tuesday; and the government began working to repel it on Wednesday, still struggling and striving against it, calling in reinforcements by telegraph from England and from the far provinces to aid the fight.

We may yet succeed in this struggle within a few days. But one thing admits no doubt: a great peril has spread through Cairo's air these past days, corrupting it most severely, filling it with these deadly germs whose harm some people may escape and others may not, and from which no one can simply slip away.

If one searches for the source of this peril, one finds that the ministry cited the negligence of a group of officials directly responsible for certain equipment. The ministry then announced in the newspapers that it had suspended some of these officials from work, transferred others to different posts, and docked half a month's salary from a third man, while transferring authority over this matter from one under-secretary to another. It then went on to combat the peril, working jointly with the Ministry of Health.

It seems most likely that the ministry will stop at this point in fixing responsibility, and most likely that it considers itself resolute in the measures it has taken and the punishments it has imposed, and most likely too that it awaits the public's admiration, its approval, and its praise for the ministry's firmness, its resolve, and its swiftness in confronting crises.

But it is only right that the ministry clarify certain matters for the public that stand in need of clarification. These officials who were punished were negligent only because they found an open path to negligence, and they found that open path because they felt no close, continuous oversight — rather, they saw a general slackness, a comprehensive shortfall, an all-encompassing idleness, and so they slackened along with the slack, fell short along with those who fell short, and grew idle along with the idle. And why should they not slacken, fall short, and grow idle, when any one of them might go to the ministry and find there, or scarcely find there, a single one of its senior officials —

scattered as they are among the resorts of Egypt and abroad? Some are resting on leave; others rest while nominally assigned to some task there, in the place where ministers and senior officials go to rest, on the beautiful shore of Alexandria. And these senior officials are themselves excused, for they are merely following the path of the ministers and under-secretaries, who grew weary over the course of the year and now take their rest when summer arrives — and the kind of rest people love best is that which costs them neither effort nor money, but is granted to its beneficiaries at the state's expense, under the pretext of carrying out some part of its business.

Had these senior officials seen the ministers and under-secretaries residing in Cairo, where their work is, rather than in Alexandria, where their comfort is, they too would have resided in Cairo — and there would then be none of this strange emptiness that anyone who visits a government office in Cairo finds in this season, when senior officials enjoy, at the state's expense, comfort, luxury, and ease, even as the lives of ordinary people and their public services are exposed to the ugliest of dangers.

There is another matter the ministry must clarify for the public. It is claimed that the ministry cabled England requesting certain parts to repair the equipment that had broken down — parts not to be found in Egypt. How, then, does the government manage to live in this country in this strange and perilous manner, with no precaution, no caution, no readiness for emergencies — emergencies that might arise on any given day?

A piece of equipment breaks down, and it cannot be repaired unless the necessary parts are brought from across the sea — as though the ministry had received some solemn pledge from time itself that its equipment could never break down, never stop working, never suffer any damage. If this is the full extent of what the government possesses, and all it is capable of, by way of readiness for the accidents that occur and the calamities that befall — then Egyptians must be certain that they have no right to feel safe about anything, or to be reassured about anything. They stand, rather, at the very edge of the abyss, liable to be pushed into it from one moment to the next, with no one to hold them back from it or save them from it.

No — this is not the conduct of governments that understand the meaning of governance, that appreciate its duties, that rise to meet its

responsibilities, and that know their first duty is to think more of tomorrow than of yesterday and today, or to think of protecting the people more than of protecting themselves, and to think of combating the dangers that may cost lives, blood, and property more than they think of combating the Wafd, or of trampling on the freedom of the press.

The lives of the people of Cairo are exposed in these days to a grave danger. Even once the damage is repaired and matters restored to what they were, the harm will already have been done, the air already corrupted, the germs already spread — and it is entirely possible that the danger will spill beyond the city of Cairo into the neighboring suburbs and towns. And the responsibility for this great harm falls not upon those officials alone who have been, or will be, punished — it falls upon other men, whose duty it was to remain in Cairo and never leave it, to oversee the officials and never fall short in that oversight, to carry out the work for which they are paid, and to protect the lives and public services entrusted to their care.

These are the ones truly responsible; these are the ones truly at fault. And yet I am confident that they will never be questioned, never be held to account, and will change nothing whatsoever in their conduct. The government offices will remain empty, or as good as empty, until the ministers return to the capital, and senior and junior officials alike will continue to shuttle between Cairo and Alexandria, ostensibly for work but in truth in search of rest and recreation. As for the lives of the people, as for their public services, as for order, as for Egypt's reputation — all of these are matters that can be given thought once the ministers have returned . . .