

A Warning

Kawkab al-Sharq (Hadith al-Massa), 23 April 1933.

I know no people like this Egyptian people, who meet the harshest hardship peoples ever meet, expend the utmost effort peoples ever expend, bear the heaviest burdens peoples ever bear — smiling through all of it, content with all of it, sincere in all of it — and yet are rewarded for what they meet, expend, and bear with nothing but disloyalty and ingratitude, with nothing but scorn and contempt!

The foreigner descends upon Egypt poor and needy, and no sooner does he arrive than he grows rich after poverty, and prospers after want; the foreigner descends upon Egypt wealthy and affluent, and no sooner does he arrive than he doubles his fortune, and increases his share of ease; the foreigner descends upon Egypt ignorant, and no sooner does he arrive than he becomes learned — or learned, and no sooner does he arrive than he becomes one of the great and singular scholars. Rarely does a foreigner set foot on Egyptian soil only to find life's avenues narrowed before him, or the doors of hope closed to him, or Egypt turning him away in despair, his hopes dashed; and the Egyptian spends what he can and what he cannot to enrich the foreigner after poverty, to secure him after fear, to satisfy him after discontent — and yet he finds from the foreigner nothing but disloyalty and ingratitude, nothing but scorn and disdain. This foreigner finds Egypt oppressive because her climate troubles him in summer, even though he enjoys it in winter; and this foreigner finds Egypt oppressive because her need for artificial beauty, for contrived ornament, and for attention to health matters remains sharp and pressing — even though he himself has monopolized the benefit in these very matters, even though he has held sole sway over the management of her finances and affairs, even though he has overseen the direction of everything in her — so the responsibility for what he complains of falls upon him before it falls upon anyone else; and this foreigner finds Egypt's ignorance oppressive, even though he was summoned to take charge of her education, and granted for it a wage he could not have dreamed of a fraction of in his own country — yet once he descended upon Egypt he was not sincere in his work, and gave the Egyptians of his learning, little or much, only in due measure, and never for a single moment ceased to think that giving learning to Egyptians was dangerous; for it removes their ignorance, lifts their darkness, makes them his equal, may dispense with his services, and may drive them to

grow weary of him and sense the deliberate neglect and shortcoming in him. Search for the foreigner's life in Egypt from whatever angle, by whatever path, and you will always find it resting on this one rule: take from the Egyptians as much as you can, and give them as little as you can. Show the Egyptians affection and warmth, while concealing from them scorn and contempt, until your need of them is exhausted — then show them what you concealed, and reveal to them what you hid! And so we find the foreigner in Egypt: you sense in him wit, warmth, and companionship, then the connection between you and this foreigner is severed, and the occasion arises for him to speak of you — and he will say nothing but ill...!

Such is Egypt's situation with the foreigner; nor is Egypt's situation with some of her own people any better than her situation with foreigners. An Egyptian displays some competence and capacity, and how quickly Egypt is enchanted by him, how quickly she surrounds him with every kind of care and patronage, every manner of encouragement and support, until he becomes a man of consequence, attaining a visible, distinguished social rank — and then he forgets those who cared for him and attended to him, those who supported him and encouraged him, those who raised him to his visible station and set him in his distinguished rank; and he comes to think of himself before he thinks of them, to attend to himself before he attends to them, and becomes an exemplar of the first rank who knows no one but himself, works for no one but himself, and sees the people only as a means that rouses the idle, elevates the lowly, and carries people to the benefits, aims, and hopes they seek; and he does not scruple, once some measure of authority is granted him, to make that authority a means to his own benefit, even if this forces him into disloyalty and ingratitude, and into humiliating the very people who had raised him from lowliness and roused him from obscurity. You may examine the lives of a great many senior officials, and you will find them resting on this one rule: deceive the people as much as you need to deceive them, and once you have reached your goal and realized your hope, secure for yourself whatever benefit you can, achieve for yourself whatever aims you can, and beware lest your loyalty to the people stand as an obstacle between you and anything you desire...!

And here are ministries whose members were nothing before the reins and bridles of government were cast into their hands; no sooner do these members frequent their offices and bureaus than their recent past and their inevitable future both become plain, and their post distracts

them from everything but the pleasure of the post itself, its prestige and its power; and behold them delighting in this pleasure, clinging desperately to it, and sacrificing for its sake many things, the least of which is the interest of this very people who raised them to ministerial rank only that they might be its servants, no more and no less.

And so God wills for this calm, docile people, in all its vigor and strength, to be the plaything of those to whom it does good, to whom it extends favor and kindness; and it feels this disloyalty at times, and resents it and is troubled by it, yet it is not long before it forgets it and turns away from it; and when it resents, it is gentle in its resentment, and when it is troubled, it is lenient in its trouble, paying no heed, neither in its resentment nor in its trouble, to those who wrong it and deny its merit and repay its kindness with ill-treatment; and when it forgets, it forgets utterly, rarely remembering, rarely reflecting — and its adversaries exploit its short memory and its vast forgiveness, growing excessive in their mistreatment of it, and immoderate in their contempt for it, their neglect of it, and their refusal even to give it a thought.

By this alone can you explain this abominable life we live, in which evil besets us from every direction, and calamities assail us from every side; for had those entrusted with our political affairs understood that, in taking up our political affairs, they did not take them up for themselves but for the people; that by virtue of their posts and station they are not our masters but our servants; that by virtue of their posts and station they ought not to humble us or exploit us, but rather ought to humble themselves for the good of their nation, and exploit their own efforts for the benefit of their country — had those entrusted with our politics understood this, no tyrant among them would have tyrannized, no transgressor among them would have transgressed, no rights would have been squandered, no dignities violated, and liberty would not have met what it meets in these days; and had the people's memory not been so short, had the people's forbearance not been so excessive, these politicians would have been compelled to reckon with the people, to take it into account, and to restrain their own desires, forcing themselves toward moderation, justice, fairness, and the acknowledgment of kindness. And had the foreigners who come to Egypt valued their rights and duties in Egypt as they value them in their own countries, and heeded their consciences in Egypt as they heed them in their own countries, Egypt would not have met from them what she meets of outward affection and hidden disloyalty; and had Egypt not been so

excessive in her forbearance, so immoderate in her forgetfulness, so lavish in her indifference to her own right and dignity, the foreigner would not have coveted her, nor found any way to deceive her and scheme against her. And had Egypt, when hungry, truly felt the pain of hunger, and had Egypt, when thirsty, truly been worn down by thirst, these events that the economic crisis has begun to bring about — events that now seem slight, yet are for all that terrifying and dreadful, foreboding an evil whose dire consequences only God knows — would never have occurred within her. These dangerous symptoms of hunger and misery have begun to appear in Cairo in an alarming, dreadful form: this typhus fever stalks among the destitute poor with its evil and horror, and these destitute poor carry this fever to their physicians at the Qasr al-Aini hospital, hoping to be rid of its evil — only to find the evil stronger than the physicians, and the physicians themselves falling into the nets of this fever, and being carried to the hospital alongside their patients; and the students of the Faculty of Medicine do not escape this fever either, falling into its nets as well. Here, then, is the disease invading the very citadel of medicine, forcing it onto the defensive — when it ought to have been this citadel that was the invader, this citadel that sent its armies into the quarters of the poor and destitute, to battle there against evil and harm, and to repel from them the armies of plagues and diseases. But what way is there to that, when those entrusted with managing the nation's wealth do not think of the nation? What way is there to that, when those entrusted with protecting the nation's health do not think of the nation? For both the one and the other think first of their posts, then second of securing themselves in those posts, then of enjoying the pleasures and prestige of those posts — and only after all this, and this, and that, do they think of the people. How is there any way to this, when the Egyptian has grown accustomed to hunger and bears his hunger, to thirst and bears his thirst, to destitution and has made himself at home in destitution? It is a failing on the part of those in authority toward the very substance of the people, and a failing on the part of the people toward their own very selves; and the fever profits from the failing of those in authority and the failing of the people, and so preys upon the poor, and invades the physicians, just as the foreigner profits from the failing of those in authority toward the people's substance, and the people's failing toward their own selves, and so toys with the people's rights, freedoms, wealth, and every element of their national life, and mocks, after all this, all Egyptians together...!

I thought of all this when I read in this morning's newspapers that the ailing Prime Minister has fixed the date of his departure for treatment: he will travel in the middle of next month, and spend some four months or so in Europe. Before this, the Prime Minister was ill for two months, during which he did nothing at all; and between his illness and his departure he has begun to call, sluggishly and heavily on account of his illness, at his office, scarcely doing any work there at all; and before all this he had spent some three months or so in Europe, taking the cure and convalescing — and throughout all of this he retains the premiership, and draws the premier's salary, and suspends the country's affairs, because he is traveling to convalesce, or because he is ill, or because he is in a period of recovery, or because he is traveling for treatment.

Had the Prime Minister valued his country's claim upon him, he would not have permitted himself to retain this post while powerless to discharge it; and had the Egyptians valued their own claim upon themselves, they would not have accepted from their Prime Minister that he monopolize the premiership while working at it no more than three or four months out of a whole year — but the source of all evil in Egypt is that the people are forbearing, excessively forbearing, and that the people's rulers are immoderate in exploiting this forbearance, paying no heed to the people and giving it no thought...!

When will the people awaken to their own right, and grow in earnest in demanding it and holding fast to it? And when will the consciences of the rulers awaken, to restrain their possessors from the transgression or neglect into which they are falling?