

Sabri-isms

Al-Wadi, 15 July 1934

It is neither strange nor new — nothing new from our Finance Minister, for people have grown accustomed to expecting oddities and marvels from him. And people know all about these Sabri-isms we wish to speak of; the newspapers have already reported them, and the clubs have discussed them — but people's knowledge of them does not follow from their understanding of them. And most of the things people learn without understanding end up being interpreted for them by those firmly grounded in knowledge, and capable of exegesis. We are, thank God, not among those firmly grounded in knowledge, nor among those capable of exegesis, and we have no wish for such exegesis or explanation for these Sabri-isms that leave the responsible officials and commentators themselves at a loss — we merely wish, as ordinary people, to understand, and we cannot understand. So we turn for help to those capable of interpretation, to explain matters to us, and to those skilled in exegesis, to interpret these marvels for us.

Some days ago, our Finance Minister, Sabri Bey, invited his fellow ministers to a naval banquet, then to a naval outing, then to tea after the outing, then to lunch after the tea. The banquet was not held on a ship owned by the Minister, nor on a yacht he kept for his own comfort and recreation, but rather on a vessel from among the state's patrol boats, said to have been prepared to guard the coast against smugglers, and to protect it from them.

We would like to understand the meaning of this banquet and the purpose of this outing — and what this tea was for. And it is our right to understand this, and to press hard for its understanding, and to insist upon it. For the fortunate Minister's share, and his colleagues' share, of this patrol boat is no greater than our own share; and the fortunate Minister's right, and his colleagues' right, to make use of this patrol boat is no greater than our own right; and all the difference between him and us is that we are children of this country, wholly excluded from any care in the use of this patrol boat, for the purpose for which it was prepared: protecting the coasts from smugglers and trespassers. And it is certain — and we take note of this ourselves — that the patrol boat was not designed as a vehicle for outings, or a fixed platform for lunch and tea parties, nor is it in your power to take this patrol boat, which we own

collectively, in the way the Minister took it for an outing, or as a fixed platform for lunch and tea parties. So we would like, indeed, to understand: how was the Finance Minister, Sabri Bey, able to invite his fellow ministers to lunch, then to the outing, then to the tea that appeared on the back of this patrol boat? And on the strength of what right belonging to the ministers was this invitation founded? And I do not say this in connection with anything trivial; we are not stopping over something petty.

There is no right of the state that is small versus another that is large; rather, all the rights of the state are grand, and whoever permits himself to hold even one of them in contempt is fit to permit himself to hold them all in contempt. And it is likewise our right to understand, and to press hard in our understanding, and to learn on whose account this lunch fell, and on whose account this outing fell, and on whose account this tea fell — was all this spending drawn from the Minister's own private funds, or was the spending charged to the state's funds? So then, did the state pay a fee for this vessel, or was it a gratuity? And from whoever claimed that it is the ministers' right upon the state that it feed them on its vessels, enable them to take an outing on them, and offer them tea afterward — this claim would open the door to these expenses being reckoned among the summer-vacation obligations for which the state provides for ministers, when they travel from Cairo to Alexandria for no compelling reason to make the journey. And if the state has permitted its ministers to spend from its funds on their food, their drink, and their recreation, then what business has it to withhold this from other than the ministers?

All these are matters people take no notice of, but we take notice of them, most keenly, and we ask about them, and we press hard in asking. For we love our ministers to be, ideally, models of precision, of clean hands, and of a pure conscience, and scrupulous about spending the state's funds even in trivial and worthless ways, without right; and about giving away the state's funds, however light and easy, except in the recognized forms of expenditure to which the public interest calls and the law permits.

Then there is another aspect to the question, which we ought to notice and take heed of, and to know our Minister's grave opinion on: what led him to hold this banquet and to invite people to this feast? And where is the happy occasion that permits ministers to expand somewhat in spending, and to draw out something from something, from which they

ought to free themselves of the embarrassment of giving and spending? Has our Finance Minister found success in resolving a grave problem among the problems of the state — in the mortgage debt, or the public debt, or the property exchanges, or in the crises of officials that will not end, or in the reduction of taxes that he does not wish to reduce, or in the relief of hardship that he does not wish to lift? He is pleased with this success, and wishes his colleagues to share in this celebration, and he sees it as his right upon the state that it grant him, beyond what is due to him for service, and in return for what he suffered on its account — of worry, of criticism from his colleagues, of what its enemies among the reproachful ones have thrown at him — that it should also grant to him and his colleagues hours of the day in which they rock on the waves of the sea, and enjoy the sight of the sun as it casts its pale rays over the roaring waves at sunset, and summon to their minds those lofty philosophical reflections that poets summon, and cultured men summon, when they see the fierce waves grow violently agitated by the images of the sky reflected upon them, by the sun's rays at the end of the day!

Certainly not! The Minister has succeeded at nothing, has resolved no problem, and no minister has any obligation upon the state whatsoever. So for what, then, was this banquet? And for what was this outing? And for what was this tea?

It is a Sabri-ism, among those Sabri-isms whose meaning escapes the people who ponder it, and even the deeply learned struggle in vain to interpret it, except as a preface to something not yet revealed of the unseen — though it may yet be revealed one of these days. For who can know what tomorrow holds in its bosom, and what time conceals within its hidden folds?

And the strange thing is that our Finance Minister's activity does not stop at this splendid Sabri-ism that he began upon going to Alexandria, for people have scarcely finished talking of this naval banquet and this naval outing, and this maritime tea, and declaring themselves at a loss to understand it and interpret it, before he opens for them a new chapter in this affair. And so the newspapers announced that he invites the High Commissioner to a banquet he will hold for him not on land but at sea, and not at his official residence, nor even at his private residence, but at a house in his own village, called after his own name — and which, we have discovered, is the very source of the name 'Sabri-isms.' Yes — if next Wednesday comes, our Finance Minister will be in Sabriya, and the High Commissioner will go to Sabriya for a magnificent lunch, at which the

High Commissioner will eat and drink, at which the entire company will be brought together — our brilliant Minister included — between the sweet and the salty, and the representative of the British Empire. It seems most likely that our ministers will all take part in this banquet, and will be invited to it. Nor is there anything strange in that, for our Finance Minister has already invited our ministers to lunch at the Dobbara Palace, and every invitation deserves a response. But I have a question for every one of you: what will people say when the High Commissioner sets out from Alexandria to Sabriya to take lunch at the table of this grave Minister? They will expect the grave Minister to become, one day soon or one day far off, a grave President himself. Let the two consuls keep watch, as the Romans used to say, for the matter here has need of watchfulness. And the two consuls here are the good man, and the Minister of Tradition — one of whom holds the presidency in his hand, while the other looks upon it from a distance, for now. My companion said: and why not say, let the consuls, in the plural, keep watch? For our Interior Minister might yet be a third consul . . . ? He is no less deserving of the consulship than the Minister of Tradition. And what is there to prevent the High Commissioner from taking his lunch at Qais, just as he will take it at Sabriya?

Do you see now that we have not finished, and are not expected to finish, with these Sabri-isms, for our Finance Minister's ingenuity will go on revealing to us, every single day, one more of his marvels?

Taha Hussein

Al-Wadi, 15 July 1934.