

Laughter

Sawt al-Umma, 1 September 1946.

It certainly does not come from the Egyptian people, for the Egyptian people is too preoccupied to laugh, beset as it is on every side by these troubles.

The Egyptian people is preoccupied with poverty, ignorance, and disease, and with the other calamities that the ministers treat with their tongues — with whatever words proceed from those tongues — while reserving for their own hearts whatever deeds might proceed from them. And the Egyptian people is preoccupied with this ordeal by which God tests its heart, sending it evil from the very quarter whence it was accustomed to receive good, and setting loose against it its own friend the Nile, to add poverty to its poverty, and misery to its misery, and to show it that it had tasted only the least part of hunger, and that misery comes not from hunger alone, but from the collapse of homes, from exposure to death, from spending night and day in the open, and from waiting for some mercy to spring up for it from the earth or descend upon it from the sky.

And the Egyptian people is preoccupied with this independence that is never completed, but only ever diminished, and with this Protectorate that must inevitably return, for it has grown homesick for Egypt, even though Egypt has grown no such longing for it. And it is preoccupied with this calamity that a party of Egyptians agreed to inscribe upon their own homeland when they accepted the founding of the Egyptian-British joint-stock company for the defense of Egypt — and for the defense of Great Britain as well.

The Egyptian people is preoccupied with all this, and with still more besides, and for this reason it cannot laugh, nor even smile, except with that laugh of al-Mutanabbi's, which so closely resembles weeping.

But I am not speaking of this sorrowful laughter, nor of these wan, sallow smiles that depict gloom and despair far more than they depict joy and hope. I am speaking, rather, of frank, open laughter, unmixed with grief or melancholy, by which its owners do not console themselves for false conjectures, disappointed hopes, and heavy cares — but which is, instead, laughter laughing as fully as laughter can laugh, and laughter as broad as laughter can ever be broad. Laughter broader than the day

when it fills the world with light and beauty, and broader than the night when it fills the world with darkness and gloom — laughter that issues from no individual, nor from any group, nor from any people, but is vaster, grander, more penetrating, and more enduring than all of these, because it issues from Fate itself.

And the laughter of Fate, as you know, fills all the space between earth and sky, and if it depicts anything at all, it depicts the folly of man before the wisdom of destiny. Fate is forever laughing, for it sees the folly of man, his self-conceit, his weeping over his yesterday and his provisioning for his tomorrow, and sees that none of this avails man anything at all. But Fate has lately laughed, these feast-days, a fresh laugh it is still immersed in. And the chief figures of this blessed era were precisely the ones who set themselves to amusing Fate and making it laugh, when they deliberated, calculated, schemed, and drew up their plans, perfecting the drawing of them, so as to keep this blessed era from taking flight, to preserve it from collapse, and to prop it up after it had seemed about to come crashing down — for it is said that the structure of the present ministry will be reinforced with a number of Saadists, so that the coalition might be made solid, immune to erosion, with no weakness able to creep into it.

It appeared to the Prime Minister, so it is said, that the coalition between the Constitutionals and the Independents was ill-suited to withstand troubles or to stand firm against events. For al-Nokrashi Pasha had exposed it to danger from the very first day the ministry was formed, and Makram Pasha then exposed it to danger from the very first day the negotiations began. Then picks were taken to it from every direction when matters grew serious, and the Egyptians were told that they must either accept the Protectorate or see the negotiations broken off; and then its very pillars crumbled at the negotiating body's last meeting, when the negotiators dispersed in that well-known fashion, five of them departing with hearts full of resentment and despair, while seven of them remained, with hearts full of fear and hope. It was at this point that it became clear to the Prime Minister, and to the leader of the Saadists, that coalition is better than discord, that concord is better than rupture, and that the Independents give little weight to consequences, since they are answerable to no one but themselves, whereas party leaders weigh consequences most carefully, since they have followers within government whom they wish to keep there, and followers outside government whom they wish to see rise into it.

For this reason, they measure the ground for their own feet before taking a step, and turn a word over in their minds a thousand times and more before uttering it, for they fear its consequences and weigh them with the utmost care. And this may perhaps explain, to those who have not yet understood, why those who departed departed, and why those who remained remained. For those who departed, departed so as to nurse the resentment filling their hearts, and to hold fast to the refusal they had shown toward what the English had proposed; while those who remained, remained so as to organize their ranks, reinforce the structure, prepare for the decisive encounter, and sew onto the garment of the ministry a few patches to keep the air from penetrating its sickly body — patches truly sturdy enough to keep out the air, whether hot or cold, from the ministry's body, and sturdy enough to let the structure withstand the wind, however fiercely it may blow or batter. The Saadists will take charge of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and of the Ministry of Justice, and of yet another ministry to be specially invented for handling weighty Arab affairs. It is said they will also take charge of the Ministry of Communications, whose present minister will be moved aside to take charge of the press, broadcasting, theater, cinema, and whatever else you please among the marvels of letters and the wonders of art. And our own esteemed master, the Foreign Minister, had wished to rest, and to devote himself entirely to the Arabic Language Academy and to his translation of Aristotle — and so he will rest, in the comfortable post of Deputy Prime Minister. As for al-Nokrashi Pasha, he will drain the cup to its dregs: he will bear the burdens of Sidqi's rule without any share in it, and will console himself with the presidency of the Chamber of Deputies, should the Chamber be permitted to resume its sessions.

*You stand still while the turning sphere wheels on, and you lay your plans
— and Fate but laughs.*