

The Generations' Burdens

Al-Musawwar, 13 March 1947.

1 I do not wish to follow the path taken by Professor Ahmad Amin Bey, but I hope, as he hoped in the article al-Musawwar published for him last week, that the hearts of the students, the parents, the parties, and the governments too will have room enough for what I wish to say in this piece — for I see no harm in their finding it hard to bear. I have grown used to people being angry with me and pleased with me by turns; their anger has never frightened me into anything, nor has their approval ever tempted me into anything. I have said, and I shall go on saying, what I believe to be true — because I believe it to be true, and because it is always better that the truth be spoken, however bitter and distasteful it may be!

2 And then, on another count, I do not direct this piece at one party rather than another, nor at one faction of Egyptians rather than another, but address it to them all alike, making no distinction among them.

3 And then, on a third count, I do not wish to look upon the students' question with the gloomy, despairing eye we have grown accustomed to turning on it for years now; I wish instead to look upon it with a bright, smiling eye, full of hope, and full of good humor too. For it may well be one of the very things that have spoiled the Egyptians' life for them, so often, that they look upon things in gloom, misery, and despair, as though disasters gave them warning every hour upon the hour, as though they had taken upon their own shoulders the burdens of this world and the next, so that they can neither move nor stir. It is as though every hour that comes upon them, whether of the night or of the day, comes bearing nothing but dreadful news and grave events. They are pessimists when they speak, pessimists when they act, pessimists when they judge things. And that alone is enough to dampen resolve, sap determination, spread darkness through hearts, souls, and minds, and bar the way to fruitful activity and useful production.

4 Students, in every land on earth, grow content and grow indignant, apply themselves to study and strike against it, and march through the great cities and the small in noisy demonstrations, shouting and surging — and life is none the worse for it, hearts are none the more burdened, and existence is not darkened before the eyes of the living!

5 Students, in every land on earth, are young people quick to contentment and quick to indignation, quick to throw themselves into earnest work and quick to throw themselves into play. This suits their nature and suits this stage of their lives... It has been known since the most ancient times, and Aristotle portrayed it brilliantly and masterfully in his Rhetoric. It is only natural, then, that we should take the young as they are, and as God wills them to be, rather than filling the world with noise and uproar, filling the air with shouting and wailing, calling up the army, suspending the police's leave, laying sticks upon heads, or aiming rifles at chests. Nor ought we to believe that Egypt's future has been lost merely because the students went on strike one day, whether in earnest or in play; nor ought we to believe that Egypt's future has thereby become guaranteed and secure merely because the students applied themselves to study and pressed hard at their revision!

6 All of this is excess where excess has no place, and extravagance where there is no need for extravagance.

7 Still, there are matters it would do well for us to pause over briefly, and to ask ourselves about, each in the privacy of his own conscience. For a quarter of a century ago, in the days of the nationalist movement, blaming the students for striking was an unforgivable crime, and a dereliction toward the homeland itself; for the students were striking in protest against the English's tampering with the homeland's rights. Many of the ministers now in office, and many of the deputies and senators who support these ministers, were themselves students who went on strike, who held striking to be a national duty, who demonstrated and held demonstrating to be a form of struggle for the homeland's sake, and who received from their leaders and politicians encouragement to demonstrate and to strike. And it seems to me that we stand today, with regard to the English, in the same position as that of a people tampered with in their homeland's rights by men trying to establish their armies within it and to split it into two halves, when God made it one, indivisible. What, then, has happened, that what our ministers once held to be duty, right, and justice has now become falsehood, sin, and injustice?! The English have not changed, and the Egyptians have not changed; it is only that those who used to roam the streets striking and demonstrating have now risen to power. Striking now displeases them, because it inconveniences them, and demonstrating now injures them, because it costs them hardship and effort!

8 Let neither the government, nor the Chamber, nor the students themselves understand me to be calling for a strike, or inciting one, or urging one on; I am, on the contrary, among those most anxious that the students devote themselves fully to their studies. But I love to state the truth, and I call upon our rulers and our leaders of opinion to take the affairs of the young with a smile and with leniency, not with scowling and frowning, nor with the anticipation of disaster, nor with dread of calamities to come!

9 And if memory does not deceive me, a certain university professor was once dismissed because he tried to form, among the students of one faculty — or perhaps not a faculty at all — a group to defend Egypt's rights, at a time when the English were upholding Sidqi Pasha's regime and refusing to let Egypt recover its rightful constitution. We saw the government's treatment of this professor as injustice upon injustice, and outrage upon outrage! And we attacked His Excellency the minister of outworn tradition with the utmost violence! Then the days turned, and time moved on, and lo, this very professor who had been dismissed for encouraging the students to resist injustice, both at home and abroad, became himself Minister of Education — and lo, he grew as impatient with the students' strikes and demonstrations as that minister of outworn tradition had once been.

10 And if memory does not deceive me, a certain prominent politician went one morning to the university square, or to the university campus, as they say, and addressed the students, saying: "We have done our duty; now do yours." And the students did their duty that day as well as duty can ever be done, for they set upon one of their own deans and very nearly cast him down from a height! It is said that this dean, outraged at the time, shut himself up at home, and that a friend of his came to him gently, consoling him and advising him not to resist the students' movement. Then the days turned, and time moved on, and lo, the very orator who had urged the students to do their duty became president of the Senate, and the very friend who had counseled the dean not to resist the students' movement became president of the Council of Ministers!

11 And I assure my readers that I recall these stories neither in anger nor with a frown, but smiling — laughing outright, in fact! For the Egyptians have not changed, and the English have not changed. Egypt still suffers injustice at the hands of some of her own sons, just as she suffers it at the hands of her allies — I very nearly let slip "her enemies"!

The only thing that has changed is that those who were once the governed, in those days, have become, in these days, the governors!

12 And the days turn, as readers well know, and a day will come when these rulers return to the ranks and become, once more, the governed. And who knows? Perhaps they will then say to the students: we have done our duty, now do yours, and will counsel certain deans not to resist the students' movements! What matters is that we not grieve over what calls for no grief, nor fall into despondency over what warrants no despondency, and that neither the students' seriousness nor their play distract us from resisting the English and from attending to the injustice they impose upon us, and the schemes they lay against us!

13 There is no doubt whatsoever that the greatest good lies in the students' devoting themselves to their studies, and in their not being diverted from these studies by whatever would squander their time and their efforts. But who bears the responsibility for these trials that befall the students when they are turned away from study, and that befall the people when it sees its own sons turned away from study?! Is it the elders who manage affairs and mismanage them, or is it the young, who throw themselves headlong into whatever matches their own nature, because God created them to throw themselves headlong into whatever matches their nature?!

14 One thing is certain: it was not the students who went to Sidqi Pasha and asked him to suspend instruction for a month and a half, because he wished to travel to London. And another thing is certain: it was not the students who went to the present ministry and asked it to besiege the university, to bar those unable to pay their fees from attending their classes, or to take that extraordinary decision abolishing the mid-year holiday! Is it not an injustice that the elders should err, and then load upon the young the burden of the very error into which they themselves have fallen?!

15 The elders must call themselves, and their own consciences, to account before they undertake many of their actions and before they make many of their decisions... and then the elders must not go on shedding the weight of their own responsibilities onto the young!

16 The students wish for nothing more than to be free to devote themselves to study, as young people the world over are free to devote themselves to study, serious at times and playful at others — for it is as much their right to be serious as it is their right to play. Let us, then,

make it easy for them to have this freedom for study, and let us avoid creating the problems that turn them away from it and discourage them from it. Let us bear our own responsibilities as men ought to bear theirs. And let us spare ourselves this absurdity, which provokes laughter even as it invites pity, of loading onto the young the responsibility for the errors of their elders!