

Problem

Taha Hussein

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Between Cairo and London these days there is a give and a take, a push and a pull, a drawing-together and a turning-away, a nearness and a distance: the two draw close until one would think love between them had reached its utmost height and come to its final end, and then draw apart until one would think estrangement had taken the place of harmony, and the two lovers had fallen into quarrel, with neither affection nor loyalty left between them. Cairo grants London every need and fulfills for it every hope. And London grants Cairo whatever support and backing, whatever sympathy and affection, it requires. But the moment talk turns to negotiations, London frowns and Cairo falls silent in dismay, and people ask themselves the source of this frown and this dismay. In truth, the source of both is simple and easy to see. London is shrewd and skillful, while Cairo is naive and well-meaning; when London takes a step, it knows exactly where to place its foot, and judges the spot before the step is taken. Cairo, however, does not step at all, but runs without judging, rushing headlong. And the wonder of it is that at the head of Cairo's government stands the Prime Minister, the most capable of the capable, the shrewdest of the shrewd, the most skillful of the skillful, the most cunning of the cunning — and yet Cairo falls, after all this, into the very trap it falls into, believing the affection between it and London to be sincere and pure, unclouded by any taint, untouched by any corruption. And yet the slightest measure of political acumen and understanding of the true state of things would show our government that the English are too skillful and too shrewd to be deceived by appearances, or to imagine that Egypt's affairs are settled, and that circumstances are favorable for settling accounts between the two countries — as the men of politics or the men of finance like to say.

What the English want, rather, is for their own purposes to be achieved and their urgent needs met, and for them to obtain, under the shadow of this present ministry, what there was no way to obtain under the Liberal Constitutionalists or the Wafdists. And once they have satisfied these wishes of theirs, they will laugh at the very friends who satisfied these wishes for them, and turn away from them with the disdain of men who have grown weary of them and hold them in contempt. Then they will receive the Wafd and the Liberal

Constitutionalists, beaming and smiling, swearing by God with all the force of their oaths that they coerced Egypt into nothing, and took from her nothing but what she herself gave them. So they did with His Excellency Yahya Pasha Ibrahim: they delivered to him the Law of Compensations and the Law of Indemnities, once they had despaired of Tharwat, God rest him, and found themselves unable to deliver to him either of these two morsels. And once they had satisfied their purpose by this, they turned coldly away from the standing government, and received Saad's ministry, God rest him, beaming and smiling, as though they had coerced Yahya into nothing, and had gained nothing at all from him.

This is the way of the English when they despair of strong ministries: they contrive weak ones instead, and ride them as a mount to carry them to their own urgent and cherished purposes. And it is strange that the Prime Minister, for all his cleverness and acumen, for all his skill and competence, did not grasp this on the day he took power, nor reckon that the English support for his ministry must be bounded by whatever urgent benefit these English derive from it. For as to the proper settlement of relations between Egypt and England, there is no way to it except through a government that Egypt herself recognizes, and in which Egypt places her trust with power and authority — because it is Egypt that grants that government its power and authority — a government that gives the parliament a true image of itself, such that this parliament is a faithful portrait, a clear mirror of the nation's will, inclinations, passions, and hopes. A government like those governments the constitution once established — the very constitution the Prime Minister has buried, swearing with all the force of his oaths, in Alexandria, that it would never be unburied nor return to life.

The English announced this, once and again. And the Prime Minister heard this announcement, read it, and understood it. But no sooner had he reached power than he forgot what he had read, what he had heard, and what he had understood. He imagined that, so long as he could come to terms with the English, satisfying their needs and fulfilling their urgent purposes, he could likewise come to terms with them on resolving the outstanding questions between the two countries.

And the Prime Minister went forward on this path: he abolished one constitution and established another; he turned away from the majority and inclined toward the minority; he neglected a nation and prized a foreigner; he drew as close to the English as he was able, and made himself as agreeable to them as he was able. He sacrificed, to this end,

whatever he was able to sacrifice — until, having carried all this to its utmost, he said to the English: now, then, let us negotiate. And London smiled its sallow smile, and said: anything but that, or the ministry resigns. Better that you content yourself with what God has apportioned you, and confine yourself to managing Egypt's day-to-day affairs — for we did not set you up to negotiate or to conclude treaties! We set you up and backed you only to force the Egyptians into quiet and stillness, and to give us rest from Egypt until we are free of our other troubles; and on that day we shall thank you for the service you have rendered us, and shall then approach these Egyptians ourselves, to settle whatever corruption lies between us and them, and to clear whatever accounts remain between us and them.

This is what the English said to the Prime Minister, smiling at him one moment and frowning at him the next. Did he, do you suppose, understand what they meant by it? Did he, do you suppose, turn away from negotiation and abandon the treaty? Did he content himself, from that day on, with what God had willed for him — that his ministry be a merely administrative one, managing day-to-day affairs and never venturing into the great political questions?

Some say yes, and some say no. The former claim the Prime Minister dislikes going against the English wish: if they tell him to go forward with negotiation, he goes forward; if they tell him to hold back, he holds back. And since they have asked him to hold back, he is, without doubt, holding back. The latter claim the Prime Minister is too courageous to be awed by the English or by their threats, and too jealous of Egypt's independence to proceed in it at London's pleasure.

They say the Prime Minister took a bold stand against Mr. MacDonald early in his tenure, demanding of him — in a firm, forceful tone no one was accustomed to hearing addressed to the English — that he not interfere in Egypt's internal affairs.

They say, too, that whatever the Liberal Constitutionalists may claim about this letter of the Prime Minister's to the British government having been agreed in advance, in both form and substance, with the High Commissioner's residence — the letter was issued by the Prime Minister, and the English government received it and let it pass in silence. And a man who could address the English Prime Minister in that tone two years ago can surely write to him now a letter saying:

It has come to my attention that your government is procrastinating over accepting the negotiation I have proposed. And since the demand for negotiation is one of Egypt's established rights, you stand between two courses: either you negotiate, or I shall declare Egypt's complete independence, and force your troops to withdraw to wherever I choose, east or west of the Canal, and occupy the Sudan, and abolish the capitulations, and dismiss the advisers, and decide in Egypt whatever I wish, subject to no oversight or accounting whatsoever.

They say the English ministry, faced with such a letter, could not but answer by accepting the Egyptian point of view, and so enter into negotiations with the Prime Minister. And I agree with these people in everything they say, and firmly believe the Prime Minister could force the English into negotiation, should he fail to entice them into it. But it is the English' right, after such negotiation, to be frank with him, and to refuse to conclude the treaty until the Egyptian people themselves conclude it. For the English do not make treaties with the Prime Minister; they make treaties with the Egyptian people. And should the English say this to the Prime Minister — as they will say it, and have indeed said it a thousand times over — how is the Prime Minister to answer them? For he knows, and the English know along with him, that the people do not back him, do not support him, and place no trust either in him or in whatever he brings about, whatever it may be; and he knows, and the English know along with him, with certain knowledge, that the Wafdists, the Liberal Constitutionalists, and the independents were not playing when they boycotted the elections, when they rejected the standing ministry, and when they declared that Egypt is bound by none of what binds this ministry. And he knows, and the English know along with him, with certain knowledge, that the great mass of the nation took no part in the elections and takes no part in the government, and that it will therefore never negotiate with the English through him, nor conclude any treaty with them through him, and that it will therefore remain free, on the day the treaty is concluded, to repudiate it and shrug it off in mockery and derision. What, then, is the Prime Minister to do? And what are the English to do with him on that day? For the Prime Minister and the English know, with certain knowledge, that the Egyptian people are in chains, unable to move, their tongue bound, unable to speak; and so, if the treaty is signed, and the standing parliament ratifies it, and the occupation status of the British army is lifted, and the Egyptian people become truly independent, and then demand the old constitution back, and the nation's rights restored in full, and its freedoms unimpaired, and

the government held to account for its rule — if all this comes to pass, as it must — will the English then leave the people and the Prime Minister to settle matters between themselves? Or will the English stand behind the Prime Minister then, as they stand behind him today? If the former, let the Prime Minister hasten to negotiate, much as I should hate to be in his place; and if the latter, let the Prime Minister tell us plainly: does he mean to bring us independence, or servitude?

The truth is that this is a difficult problem, yet its solution is simple, if the Prime Minister and the English wish it. And this solution lies only in the Prime Minister's stepping down from power, in the dissolution of parliament, and in the holding of entirely free elections. And I am confident that the whole of the opposition would not for a moment hesitate, were I to pledge to the Prime Minister and to his English friends that, should he win leadership in these elections, or win a seat in either chamber and nothing more, he would then be entitled to negotiate with the English and to conclude a treaty with them — and it would be for us to look upon his treaty fairly, and accept it if it satisfies us.

But before that, the Prime Minister knows, and the English know along with him, that the Egyptian people wish to negotiate with the English and to conclude a treaty with them — the negotiation of a free people with a free people, the treaty of a noble nation with a noble nation. We said as much to the English while martial law was in force, the Protectorate stood, and the English reigned triumphant, ruling unopposed and commanding unresisted. Are we now to suppose that, with the Protectorate gone, martial law lifted, and independence proclaimed, we can no longer say what we were saying thirteen years ago? By no means, Your Excellency. You may negotiate with the English and conclude a treaty with them, and obtain from them more than Muhammad Mahmud and Nahhas obtained, or less — yet you know, and the English know along with you, that the outcome of all this will be rejected and repudiated, because you went into these negotiations while your nation lay humiliated and in chains. Restore to it its honor, and strike off its chains. Then think of negotiation afterward, if you still find a way to it; but before that, content yourself with an administrative ministry and the management of day-to-day affairs, until God decides between you and the people — and that day is near, however distant it may appear to you.