

The Candle-Bearers

Al-Balagh, 7 March 1946.

I do not know which prince of the old tales it was who disputed with one of his ministers over what is told of certain philosophers, that one of them said: habit is a second nature. And the prince had come to trust this philosopher for the depth of his insight, the soundness of his judgment, the shrewdness of his opinion, and the thoroughness of his inquiry. And so he believed that habit is indeed a second nature, and that discipline can draw an animal out of its instinctive condition and its innate savagery, so that it becomes cultivated by the culture of civilization and takes on its morals and manners as a second nature.

And his minister esteemed the prince first and esteemed the philosopher second, but he held that truth is greater than either the prince or the philosopher, and he held that this second nature is nothing but an affectation unable to hold its ground against the first nature and the instincts upon which creatures are formed. The dispute between the prince and the minister grew so heated that the prince very nearly lost his temper — and the anger of princes in old tales is a serious thing indeed, foreboding grave consequences. And so the minister grew gentle, and asked his prince for a little time in which to furnish him with decisive proof that the first nature is stronger and holds greater sway than the second. The prince granted him the respite he asked for, and the minister set himself to thinking and weighing the matter until evening came; and that evening he returned to the palace smiling, his heart at ease and his soul content as well, for the prince had called for one of his magnificent banquets. And when he sat down at the table, with the men of state and the nobles of the realm seated around him, the candle-bearers came forward — and the affair of these candle-bearers is a wonder beyond wonders, for they were not slave women or free women, neither of Byzantine stock nor of Indian stock nor of Sudanese stock, but rather cats, trained with the gentlest discipline and cultivated through continual instruction, accustomed to carrying candles and standing with them in the dining hall whenever the prince sat down to his table.

And the prince fell to talking with the men of state around him, in various pleasant and amusing conversations; and while they were so occupied, suddenly everything around them fell into disorder, for the candles were flung to the ground, and the cats fell to crowding and

racing one another. The servants rushed forward, lifting the lit candles for fear of fire, and separating the jostling, racing, clamoring cats, to restore some measure of calm to the hall. The prince watched all this, furious and indignant, but the minister smiled at him, and bowed before him, and said: "May God prosper the prince — did I not tell him this morning that the second nature cannot hold its ground against the first?" The prince said: "And what is the meaning of this?" The minister said: "Do you see how these racing, clamoring cats flung down their candles, cast off their training, and reverted to their own nature?" The prince said: "I do not understand you at all!" The minister said: "I threw before them a mouse, which I had been concealing in my sleeve; and when they saw it, they flung down their candles, and cast off the ways of civilization, and reverted to their first instinct, and crowded around the mouse, each of them racing to reach it before the others."

And from that time forward, the prince believed, and the people believed along with him, that this second nature is nothing but an affectation, and that it is the first nature which, in the end, governs the deeds of both animal and man alike.

This is a tale not unlike what Egypt now enjoys in this fortunate era, and it invites the Egyptians to think, and to weigh, and to advance with clear-eyed insight or to hold back with due caution; for they came to know the Prime Minister, in his first ministry, as a man of strength who knew no weakness, violent and no lover of gentleness, domineering and unaccustomed to tenderness, overbearing and no lover of moderation, resolute in pursuing what he willed, turned aside by nothing from what he willed, affecting gentleness and tenderness only so long as gentleness and tenderness served his purpose. And when they did not suffice him, he hastened to severity and violence, to force and might, never stopping short of either until he had attained what he wanted.

This is his nature, the nature he was formed with, which he can neither change nor alter; for whatever is thus created remains thus, as the grammarians say. And the Prime Minister spent sixteen years after leaving his first ministry disciplining his nature and guiding it, correcting his instinct and cultivating it, training himself in gentleness upon gentleness and tenderness upon tenderness, in kindness and charm and the deepest humility, in endearing himself to people through what he said and winning their affection through what he did, drawing lessons from what befell him in his own ministry and taking warning from what befell the other ministers in their successive ministries. He remained in his

house and in his club, watching the governments harshly, watching the people fondly and drawing close to them, watching the English, warning them with reserve and excusing himself to them with scruple — until some of the ministers who feared him grew less wary of him, and some of the simple-hearted who trusted him grew confident in him. Then he leapt into power with gentleness and patience, and sat upon the seat of power with composure and dignity, and spoke, and said nothing but good. And people thought that his second nature had overcome his first, and that this character he had schooled himself in over sixteen years had overcome the character he was born with; and he himself rose in the Chamber of Deputies to ask his adversaries to forget the past, to remember that sixteen years are enough to forget it, not to judge him by his old name and his old record, but to wait and see his new conduct and his record in the days to come, and to judge him then with clear-eyed insight and due deliberation. And some people trusted him, just as the prince of the old tale trusted the candle-bearers, while others did not trust him, just as the minister of the old tale doubted the candle-bearers. But the doubt did not last long, nor did the waiting weigh heavily on people's souls; for it was no more than a matter of days and days before the mouse was thrown down before the cats, and the candles fell to the ground, and nature overcame nurture, and acquired character proved, as the ancient poet puts it, no match for inborn character.

And I have no wish to detail the events, nor to dwell upon them, for all Egyptians see them, and all Egyptians hear of them, and all Egyptians are able to judge them with due deliberation and clear-eyed insight. Nor do I wish to mention the confiscated newspapers, for the Egyptians know when they are permitted to read the papers and when they are forbidden to read them. Nor do I wish to mention the garbled statements and the truncated news reports, for all Egyptians know, when they read, whether they are reading garbled words or straightforward ones, whether they are reading full reports or abridged ones. And all Egyptians know that many among them draw their news from London rather than from Cairo, and all Egyptians know that the opposition papers are read before they are permitted to be published; and if they refuse to submit to this, invoking the law and invoking the constitution, they are confiscated after printing, and kept from reaching their readers. And the Egyptians know that these sixteen years have not changed Sidqi Pasha's nature at all; for nature is too strong for habit to change it, and instinct outlasts whatever civilization may try to erase of it.

And the Egyptians ask themselves: why did al-Nokrashi Pasha resign? And what has Sidqi Pasha changed in the governance of his gifted pupil? And the Egyptians answer this question by saying that al-Nokrashi Pasha found himself too weak to control the situation, too short of reach to compel the Egyptians to obedience and submission, to compliance and acquiescence, and so he chose his own well-being and resigned. And that Sidqi Pasha found himself of longer reach and wider grasp than his able and gifted pupil. He found himself more capable of compelling the Egyptians to obedience, and better suited to teaching them how to walk upon eggs without breaking them, and upon dough without spoiling it. And for this reason he takes up the burdens of governance calmly and confidently, cheerful and smiling, knowing no path by which anxiety might reach his soul — for his soul is troubled by nothing and vexed by nothing, but is rather a soul that turns with every circumstance, wearing whatever garment that circumstance requires.

Yes, the Egyptians know all this; but the Egyptians also know that they have rights from the English which they wish to win, and that their path to winning these rights is negotiation, and that the first and last condition of any negotiation is freedom — the freedom of the people, not the freedom of the government alone. And the Egyptian people are not free, nor can they be free, while Sidqi Pasha governs them with a policy suited to his own first nature. It is the height of folly and the depth of absurdity to say that the Egyptian negotiators will enter into negotiation as free men, for these negotiators will never be free unless they stand upon a free people and rely upon a free homeland. They will not be free while the English occupy the cities and are able to open fire on the people whenever they fear, or imagine they fear, anything at all.

They will not be free while their own affairs and the affairs of Egypt rest with the Prime Minister, to do with them and with her whatever he pleases. The English negotiators will be free, because they stand upon a free government and a free people. And the Egyptian negotiators will be bound, because they stand upon a bound government and a bound people. And let the negotiations, after that, produce whatever they will, for whoever is bound by what they produce is bound by a dictated word — accepted by the weak, if he so wishes, that he may find rest and give rest; or rejected by him, if he so wishes, that he may reap the fruits of this rejection — and what fruits they would be! Let the Egyptians believe me: their affairs are not in their own hands, but in the hands of this small handful who surrendered the reins to al-Nokrashi Pasha, who proved too

weak to hold them fast; and who have now surrendered the reins to Sidqi Pasha, so that these few short days have already shown that he is of harsher temper and broader cunning than his pupil — and what remains hidden is greater still.