

Examination (2)

Taha Hussein

Kawkab al-Sharq, 23 March 1934

As for its taking, it was accomplished with some length, hardship, and difficulty; as for its result, it has not yet appeared, though it would have been well for the examinees had it appeared these days, so that they might greet the feast smiling at it and at the hope it carries, or troubled by it and by the despair and hopelessness it carries.

But the examiner who conducted this test, posing the questions and listening to the answers, is a man of leisured temperament who dislikes haste, and has no inclination to speed, but loves to take his time and is fond of patience; and perhaps, like other examiners, he savors this cruel pleasure — the pleasure of delaying the announcement of the result, and the sense that those who sat the examination are awaiting it in anxiety and unease.

People usually think well of examiners, and regard them as supreme models of simplicity, ease, and gentleness; but people are mistaken, for among examiners there are cruel ones, and among examiners there are some who tasted the bitterness of examination and of waiting for results, and who chafed against their examiners when they were students, and who now find a pleasure — a strange, luxurious, cruel pleasure — in making their students taste what they themselves tasted when they were students sitting examinations.

We do not know whether the High Commissioner ever tasted the bitterness of examination and the wait for a result; we do not know whether the High Commissioner finds what cruel examiners find in this strange, luxurious, cruel pleasure. But what is beyond doubt is that the High Commissioner has examined, and prolonged the examination; and when he had finished examining, he did not hasten to announce the result, nor did he think to prepare for the students a happy feast, or even a calm, reassuring feast — a restful one, at the very least.

You have perhaps understood that those who sat the examination are the ministers of Egypt, those who oversee her affairs, and those who govern her public life. We must note, with no small measure of appreciation, that the High Commissioner, for all his cruelty, was gentle and compassionate; for he came to Egypt and stayed some weeks, then

departed from Egypt and was absent some weeks, leaving to those who were to sit the examination a wide opportunity to prepare themselves for the great day — to study, to confer, to research and to memorize, and each of them to make ready in the best possible way, so as to sit the finest examination in the fairest and most complete manner!

Say what you will, dear reader, and let the ministers say what they will, and let the High Commissioner say what he will too; there is no doubt that these individual interviews held between the High Commissioner and the ministers, beginning with the Prime Minister and ending with the Minister of Agriculture or another, left in people's minds — I do not know why — this curious, painful feeling that our ministers were sitting an oral examination before the new High Commissioner. It is certain that the political representatives of foreign powers come to Egypt and depart from it, and become acquainted with the ministers while the ministers become acquainted with them, and the Egyptians find nothing strange in that, or anything resembling a strange feeling. It is also certain that the High Commissioner, had he wished, could have met the ministers to become acquainted with them and to let them become acquainted with him, nothing more, gathered once, on one day, in one place, over cups of coffee, or cups of tea, or around a table bare of coffee and tea, speaking to them and listening to them, after which the company would disperse, and the interviews would continue afterward, if there were anything calling for their continuation. But the High Commissioner did not prefer this manner of becoming acquainted with the ministers, but instead took to summoning them to him one by one. He receives one of them on one day, then waits several days to receive another of them, and he may receive one today and receive his colleague tomorrow. And he may grow brisk, receiving one in the morning and receiving his colleague in the evening; the activity for the examination, or the weariness of it, may intensify, so that he receives two ministers in a single morning.

The times of these interviews were announced before they took place, and news of them was broadcast after they took place, and the Egyptians would read what the newspapers broadcast, and would feel both pity and pain — pity for the ministers, for anyone who comes forward to an examination deserves pity — and pain for Egypt and for themselves, for they had thought themselves independent, and had thought that if their ministers had no choice but to sit an examination, it ought to be sat before the Egyptian Parliament. And our ministers have indeed sat that examination before Parliament, and achieved in it the

highest marks.

For all this, the Egyptians felt pity, and for all this, the Egyptians felt pain; the pity ended with the end of the examination, but the pain has not ended, and ought not to end until the Egyptians see their country given ministers who sit no examination except before Parliament.

We think that the talk of the newspapers ought to touch on this matter; indeed, we think that the talk of the newspapers ought to dwell at length on this matter, for it is more deserving of attention and study, and more deserving of explanation, interpretation, and analysis, than the tea party to which the leaders, the men of politics, and the senior officials were invited at the High Commissioner's residence on Tuesday evening. There was nothing in that party calling for al-Ahram to write two columns or more about it; it was merely one of those parties that arise for the sake of courtesy, rest upon courtesy, and end where parties of courtesy end — in acquaintance and the forging of ties between a man of standing and weight in Egyptian politics and a people of standing and weight in Egyptian political life. Have the Egyptians ever, on any day, been uncouth or remiss in the manners of courtesy and the forms of social life? And was the High Commissioner any less attentive than they to these forms and those manners? It was only natural that they should call upon him, and only natural that he should invite them to tea and that they should answer his invitation; nor have the Egyptians ever, on any day, refused to answer an invitation for fear of meeting one another despite their differing inclinations and tendencies, for they know how to live the life of civilized peoples. It would be a profitless prolixity, or, as the French say, a seeking of one's back at the fourteenth hour, to multiply words over this tea, in which there is nothing strange. The subject that deserves thought, that deserves explanation, that deserves questioning and the awaiting of an answer, is rather these individual interviews that took place between all our ministers and the High Commissioner, in a manner not known before, for which custom provides no precedent, and which cast into the minds of all Egyptians the impression that they were seeking this interview as though seeking to sit an examination, and that the conversations exchanged between them and the High Commissioner during these interviews concerned matters unlike the weather and the rain, the mildness of the climate, and the beauty of the Nile, but rather matters like those with which ministers concern themselves — affairs of government and the conduct of business.

This is what deserves to have "columns" written about it, and to be given attention by al-Ahram and by the newspapers other than al-Ahram that concerned themselves with Tuesday's party; but whatever the case, there is no way to retrieve what has passed, and no one can deny or prevent the fact that the ministers went, each separately, to the High Commissioner's residence as students go to the examination room; nor can anyone deny or prevent the fact that this going was painful and distressing; nor can anyone deny or prevent the fact that this painful going has results, like the results of an examination, which, if they do not appear today, will appear after the feast, after a time that may be long or may be short, but which, in all likelihood, is near in any case.