

Issa-isms . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 16 June 1934

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The discussion of this immortal Issa-ism must continue, for talk of it cannot stop, and ought not to stop, since it holds lessons and admonitions that Egyptians ought to dwell upon at length, and draw benefit from, and draw that benefit well. Here is an Egyptian man, from among the very finest of Egyptians, who studied in Egyptian schools, diligent in his studies, eager for them, his soul filled with love of learning, and love of country, and hope that he might benefit himself, and benefit his homeland, through the study and the learning he pursued. Until, having completed his studies in Egypt successfully, his talent evident, he left Egypt, full of vigor, sound of insight and firm of foot — as the old poet says — doubly confident in himself and in his nation, doubly devoted to his craft and his country, doubly hopeful for his present and his future. He studied in Europe as the most diligent of Europeans study, and won in Europe what the most fortunate of Europeans win, through work, diligence, and success. Then he returned to his homeland, believing in it, devoted to it, his mind astir with countless thoughts, all bound up with this dear homeland, which ought to be independent in its own affairs, whose sons ought to be independent in meeting its needs, and whose sons ought to bear all the responsibilities that men of rising stature bear in a rising nation. But no sooner had he reached his homeland and settled in it, and made contact with those overseeing its affairs, and those managing its life, than his bright hopes began to darken, his intense vigor began to wane, his confident trust began to weaken, and he looked around him, only to find the Egyptian government regarding him with something of disdain and pity, telling him that he had not yet proven himself fit to shoulder weighty matters and great works, and that he should content himself with what an Egyptian young man ought to content himself with — to be, in his own homeland, a follower rather than a leader, a subordinate rather than one followed — and that he should accept what an Egyptian young man ought to accept — to remain a student no matter how complete his studies, and to remain influenced no matter how gifted he is, and to regard the foreigner as a pupil regards a teacher, as the weak regard the strong, as the ordinary man regards the exceptional one — and that he should content himself with what an Egyptian ought to content himself with, of a modest salary, while

foreigners win vast and lavish wages. And yet, through all this, his vigor never waned, his resolve never wavered, his determination never faltered; instead he worked diligently, and served his craft and his country faithfully, until he won the foreigners' satisfaction — and how little it takes to satisfy them — and moved them to bear witness for him — and how little they bear witness. And it seemed to him that after this long tenure, and these changing circumstances, he would at last be granted what he had wanted, and would rise to the responsibility he ought to have risen to long ago.

And why should he not expect this, when the foreigners themselves had asked that he be given the professorship? But what happened? The Ministry's Secretary-General asks that the matter of his post be presented separately; the Ministry's Under-Secretary agrees; the Minister agrees, and asks that the reply to the School of Engineering be written — according to the understanding reached — and the reply is then written — according to the understanding reached. And this 'understanding' turns out to be an agreement among three Egyptians — one a minister, one an Under-Secretary, one a Secretary-General — all Egyptian, no doubt born in Egypt, raised in it, their hearts stirred by its hopes; all educated, no doubt able to tell good from evil, dignity from disgrace, independence from servitude — and yet all of them believers, together, in this 'understanding' that denies the Egyptian the right to shoulder responsibility in his own country, that denies the Egyptian the right to be a professor in an Egyptian school, however unquestionably qualified he may be, and that wishes this Egyptian post to go to a British man. An agreement carried out by Egyptians, to push an Egyptian away from his right, and to install an Englishman in that right's place. And it seems most likely that they volunteered for this agreement of their own accord, that the English did not order them to it — nor should the English order such a thing — and that the English did not ask it of them — nor should the English ask for such a thing. But these men, nonetheless, felt no scruple over it, no misgiving about its evil, and entered into it with perfect ease, because the delicate circumstances of politics call upon Egyptians not to wrong Egyptians, and call upon Egyptians to swallow Egyptians' own rights, and present that right as a gift to the English.

The English did not ask this of the Minister, the Under-Secretary, and the Secretary-General — and yet they asked it of themselves nonetheless, and there is no contradiction or strangeness in this statement. For the English did not come to these gentlemen demanding

that Egyptians be wronged, that their standing be diminished, that their worth be belittled; but the English did impose upon Egypt an educational and administrative policy whose natural result is that the Egyptian shrinks before the English official, and that the English official shrinks before himself. That telegraphic dispatch which arrived in Egypt at the dawn of the occupation, ordering that the Egyptian official, however elevated his rank, be obedient to the English official, however lowly his rank — and which remained the governing principle of political life in Egypt for nearly half a century — its traces were not erased on the day the Protectorate was abolished, and its traces cannot be erased from the souls of all Egyptians so long as English authority stands present, luring the weak with intimidation and enticement.

That education which the English imposed upon Egypt for decades upon decades, and which revives in the Egyptian soul neither dignity, nor honor, nor any feeling of dignity and honor — its traces were not erased on the day the Protectorate was abolished, and its traces cannot be erased from the souls of all Egyptians so long as English authority stands present, luring the weak with intimidation and enticement.

So do not be surprised, then, when you see Egyptians agreeing among themselves to exclude an Egyptian from an Egyptian post, in order to install a British professor in his place.

And do not think this story is unique, or confined to Professor Mustafa Nazif and the School of Engineering; it is rather a common, familiar story, that befalls Egyptian youths across the board. Ask whomever you wish among these Egyptians, who studied and studied well, who earned their degrees and earned them thoroughly, and then came forward with the sacred spark burning in their hearts that drives them to love their country and serve it. Ask them about this sacred spark: what has become of it? What has befallen it? They will all answer you that it has been extinguished, or has very nearly been extinguished. The ministers, and the senior officials, have poured upon it cold water — water composed not of oxygen and hydrogen, but of eagerness to satisfy the English, and doubt in the worth of Egyptians.

This is our condition, after this happy Cromerian era that the English long for, and boast of its merits. We have denied ourselves to the utmost limit of denial, and come to know the English, and to fear them, to the utmost limit of knowledge and fear. What wonder is there, then, that the English should long for this era, wishing it to produce for them, from

our coming generations, just as it produced for them from the generations of the occupation, men who deny their fellow Egyptians, care nothing for them, and know the English, and hold them in the very highest esteem?

To what extent ought the Minister of Tradition and his aides be blamed for this Issa-ism? Do they not have some excuse for what they have done — are they not, after all, sons of that very generation in which the Egyptian official, however elevated, was bound to obey the English official, however lowly, and in which the Egyptian schools shaped their pupils not as Egypt wished, but as Dunlop wished . . .

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