

Rot ...

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1 My companion laughed when I dictated this title to him, and he had every right to laugh, as other readers have every right to laugh too; for the title is strange and amusing.

2 But I have made no pledge to anyone, nor was it ever mine to pledge to anyone that I would choose for them titles built entirely of a seriousness that breeds frowns, stirs no smile, and prompts no laughter. And what can I do, if the subject I wish to address to my readers is precisely what dictates this strange, amusing title, and imposes it by sheer necessity? Can I, can you, can anyone besides you and me, name these varieties of corruption that have crept into Egyptian governance — unraveling it utterly, corrupting it utterly, and making its reputation the amusement of gossips and the fireside talk of storytellers — by any name other than rot: that which can scarcely gain a hold on anything without corrupting it, carrying off the best that was in it, and leaving behind only an image that, however well it deceives the eye, cannot stand up to trial and examination? And was the administration's injustice toward the people, its excess in this injustice, and its persistence in it, anything but a rot that corrodes the cooperation and solidarity, the trust and the reassurance, that ought to exist between the people and the administration — until all of this is transformed into suspicion, fear, despair, and hostility; until those who look upon Egypt from afar imagine there to be an administration there that treats people gently and watches over their affairs with justice and fairness; yet once they draw near this administration and test its workings, and see the story of al-Badari and the similar shameful, wretched stories, they learn that this administration is an image which rot has corrupted, leaving nothing of it but form and appearance?

3 And was this corruption which has, to our deep regret and profound sorrow, crept into the management of the state's finances — in collection, in safeguarding, and in expenditure — anything but a rot that has eaten away the financial system entirely, leaving nothing of it but appearance and form?

4 They have told of money being collected by coercion, by violence, by the lash, and by hauling people to police stations bound in ropes and chains; and they have told of unjust taxes, sanctioned by no law and permitted by no regulation, being imposed upon the people out of spite, out of guile, and as punishment for offenses they never committed; and they have told that this money, collected by coercion and injustice, seized by violence and tyranny, settled in the state's coffers only long enough for excess to carry it off in every direction, and for waste to squander it in every way, before it left this treasury to go where it ought never to have gone — some of it spent on varieties of luxury and extravagance, some of it spent on satisfying a certain faction of people, favoring them with charity and benefit, and singling them out for riches and wealth. And we have recounted a great deal of this: how often have we spoken of the conferences! How often have we spoken of the canal-clearing projects! How often have we spoken of the Domains Administration! And how often have the present ministry and the fallen ministry heard these accounts, yet have been unable, to this day, to rise and deny them, or answer them!

5 And was the Corniche affair anything but a single instance of this rot? God forgive us — it was, rather, a great deal of rot, of varied shapes and kinds: some of it touching the municipality in Alexandria, some of it touching the ministry in Cairo; some of it touching administration, some of it touching finance. Indeed, could the inquiry the ministry set about conducting into the Corniche affair, and the committee it formed to carry it out, lay its hand upon the whole of this rot, drawing it out of its hiding places and exposing it fully to the people? Did not some of this rot escape that inquiry altogether — rot that appears sacred, appears beyond reproach, and appears to be shielded by hidden powers not only from the investigating committee, but from Parliament itself? Do you suppose me mistaken, then, to call these varieties of corruption rot, and to take this rot's name as the title of this article?

6 And tell me of these scandals which the papers have taken to broadcasting, and have persisted in broadcasting for days now, and into which the prime minister himself has been compelled to wade, taking a great share of their broadcasting upon himself — how else can you name them? Are they not a rot that works within the government, destroying it utterly, exhausting it utterly, carrying off its essence, its finest part, and the best that was in it, and leaving behind nothing but an appearance the eyes can see, and a form the sight can take in — so that when trial and examination touch it, it can offer neither resistance nor endurance?

7 What? The prime minister, the good man — he who presides independently over the ministry, who bears the burdens of governing, who is bound to say nothing except after deliberation, reflection, and careful judgment — now declares that, while standing in for Sidqi Pasha as head of the ministry, he received a letter from this same Sidqi Pasha advising him that it would be well to caution the minister of works to be careful in his dealings with certain contractors in London, since these dealings were damaging the ministry's reputation. He then declares that he alerted the minister of works to this, and that the minister of works went back to London, met Sidqi Pasha along the way, then met in London with certain engineers and contractors and spoke to them of these matters, then returned to Egypt and informed the prime minister — who was not yet prime minister at the time — that the connection Sidqi Pasha had mentioned did not in fact damage the ministry's reputation, but that what damaged the ministry's reputation was another connection, between Sidqi Pasha himself and another, foreign contractor, who used to frequent the contractors in London, showing them a photograph of the dictator inscribed in his own hand, and telling them that winning the Gabal al-Awliya contract was impossible except with the dictator's blessing. What? The prime minister tells all this to the newspapers, thereby placing on record that he had shared in government with two men who hurled accusations at one another, each thinking ill of the other, each spreading evil of the other, each doubting the other's share of integrity and purity — knowing this, and keeping silent about it, and sharing in government with these two men, restrained from doing so neither by his upright soul, nor his good heart, nor his clean conscience — until, once he was thrown out of that ministry, cast out of it altogether, he spoke of it to the people. And to what purpose did that speech serve? Yes — and the prime minister places on record against himself that when he formed his ministry, or his ministry was formed for him, he agreed, before doing so, to share in government with the minister of communications, who had been minister of works, about whom he had said what he said, and spoken as he spoke. Is all this not a rot working within the government, corrupting it in the ugliest way, demolishing it in the most hideous way — an era in which all these scandals we have alluded to above take place, in which some of its men and its pillars think so ill of one another to the degree the prime minister himself has revealed, in which ugly talk abounds about it, in which shameful rumors are broadcast about it, in which its affairs are taken up by inquiry, now at the hands of the public prosecution, now at the hands of committees — how can you describe it? How can you name it? And how can you deny

that it is an era in which rot has worked until it has destroyed it, exhausted it, and rendered it unfit to endure?

8 Some days ago I was reading an account of what took place in the French Chamber of Deputies during the disturbances that occurred in Paris at the beginning of last month, and there was a man from the opposition who did not hesitate to tell the head of the French government and his fellow ministers: that their holding of power was a disgrace to France. And what had that head of the French government and those fellow ministers of his done? It has not been established, to this day, that they violated any constitutional principle, or overstepped any boundary of the law, or transgressed any principle of morality; they were accused only of harshness in dealing with the people and of weakness toward schemers — and yet it was said to them from the highest tribune in the French Chamber of Deputies, that is, from the highest political tribune on earth, that their taking up the burdens of government in France was a disgrace to France. That statement was then published in the French official gazette, then broadcast in every French newspaper, daily and otherwise; those ministers resigned within hours of that statement, and they are now being questioned before committees of inquiry. In Egypt, by contrast, our prime minister places on record that he had been a member of a ministry whose members hurled accusations of wrongdoing at one another, knowing this and bearing with it patiently; and then the premiership itself is entrusted to him, and he does not hesitate to share government with some of those very accusers; and then he does not hesitate to broadcast this fact widely, and to proclaim it openly, without a thought of resigning, without a thought of asking that colleague of his to resign, and no member of Parliament thinks to question him, or to question his colleague, or to question Sidqi Pasha about the truth of this matter — a matter that would shame even the least cultivated of men, the least mindful of the honor of public life.

9 Describe all this as you will, and name all this as you will; but I myself can see it as nothing but rot that has corrupted the government, and exposed all of Egyptian life and the whole of Egypt's reputation to the greatest evil and the gravest danger. And I am utterly sincere, utterly truthful, when I assure the prime minister and his two colleagues, the dictator and the minister of communications, that as I read this talk the newspapers broadcast these days, I cannot resist the shame, cannot ward off the disgrace that stirs within me, and cannot but feel a painful embarrassment and a deep distress when some foreigner speaks to me of

this disgrace with which Egypt is branded, which spreads through her air as epidemics spread, and which makes Egypt the plaything of the frivolous and the sport of those who toy with her.

10 Does Egypt not command enough dignity in these ministers' eyes to move them to relinquish power, and to refer this whole matter to where inquiry may sift it thoroughly, so that the guilty may be held to his guilt, and justice may proclaim the innocence of the innocent? Does Egypt not command enough dignity in these ministers' eyes to alert them that the spread of this corruption does not stop its harm at the inevitable erosion of trust in men of government, and at driving the people to doubt everything and suspect everything, but goes beyond this to something no less evil and no less vile: paving the way for interference to those who wish to interfere, creating an opportunity for domination to those who wish to dominate, and giving the foreigner license to say today what they have been saying for more than half a century — that the Egyptians are utterly unfit to bear the burdens of government with the integrity of soul, purity of conscience, and clean hands, tongues, and hearts that governing requires.

11 Let the prime minister believe me when I say that, after having said what he said and broadcast what he broadcast, it is owed to himself and to his nation that he relinquish his post, and that he leave these scandals, which he himself helped broadcast only yesterday, to inquiry alone, so that people, Egyptian and otherwise, may know where the guilty party lies, and where the innocent.