

Headlong Haste

Al-Balagh, 21 March 1946.

Some newspapers noted a few days ago that our dear ally is in no hurry to choose the delegates who will represent her in Sidqi Pasha's negotiations. And our great Prime Minister was in Alexandria at the time, resting from the strain of his labors, or adding to the strain of his labors, or combining labor and rest, as he is accustomed to combine contradictions, being a man of boundless energy despite all events and all troubles.

He was in Alexandria working, or resting, or he was in Alexandria working and resting, when he read this passing remark in some newspaper; but it was no passing remark to him at all — it was a fixed, insistent notice that planted itself before him and would not go away, neither veering to the right nor to the left, but holding its ground as though bound to it with ropes of flax. The Prime Minister wished to turn his gaze from it but could not, and it stirred up anxiety in his soul, and the anxiety turned into fear, and the fear turned into alarm, and the Prime Minister, as they say, got on the line to London. And there are many ways to get in touch with London: the telephone, the telegraph, the psychic waves that pierce the veils of the unseen without piercing the vault of heaven, and the imagination that roams the lands of the earth, indeed roams the atmospheres of other planets, while its owner remains fixed in his place, unmoving.

The Prime Minister got in touch with London at once, on the wings of truth or on the wings of imagination, and then returned from London. And his going there and his return from it took less time than the blink of an eye; and as the Arab poet says:

Between the blink of an eye and its opening, God changes one state into another.

The Prime Minister's spirit went to London gloomy and resentful, and returned from it comforted and content, and it had scarcely settled in Alexandria before it got in touch with Cairo, and got in touch with Cairo by telephone, dictating to many newspapers — not to one alone — what would dispel this anxiety that had beset men's souls, this fear that had shaken their hearts, and this alarm that had driven their very consciences from their proper places.

It dictated to a great many newspapers the news of this short, swift, and fruitful journey between Alexandria and London — this journey that returned to Sidqi Pasha the certain tidings before he could blink again, filling his heart with security, confidence, and peace of mind, for it had penetrated to the very depths of the British Foreign Office, indeed to the very depths of the souls of the officials responsible there, and then came back to say: the astrologers lied, even were they telling the truth; the telegraph companies lied, even though they said nothing but fact; and the newspapers' forecasts lied, even though they read the secrets of the unseen. And it came back to say: the British government is not slow, nor hesitant, nor fond of delay in choosing its negotiators, but will appoint them at once, this very instant, before Sidqi Pasha can blink a second time, before the telephone call ends, before the writers' pens stop moving, before the newspapers are printed, and before the readers read them. For it would not be fitting that Egypt should appoint her representatives to the negotiations while Great Britain lagged behind in appointing hers.

Nor is Great Britain's desire for the negotiations any less than Egypt's, nor is her need for them any less than Egypt's need. And everything has shown, and continues to show, that Great Britain loves haste with all her heart, and hates delay with all her heart. The proof of this is that she tormented al-Nokrashi Pasha most severely for how much she pressed him to request the negotiations, so that al-Nokrashi Pasha found himself caught between two fires, indeed between several fires: the fire of Mr. Bevin, who summoned him to the negotiations; the fire of Sidqi Pasha, who pushed him toward the negotiations; the fire of Makram Pasha, who urged him on toward the negotiations; and the fire of the Egyptian people, who demanded the negotiations of him. And when al-Nokrashi Pasha left his post of power and Sidqi Pasha leapt into it, Great Britain's desire for the negotiations grew so intense that it delighted her enemy, alarmed her friend, and filled Sidqi Pasha's heart with mercy and tenderness, so that he hastened the procedures for entering the negotiations, and it was only a matter of a few days, or many, before he had chosen the negotiators and secured the decree appointing them.

And meanwhile, the newspapers were publishing that Britain was taking her time, not hurrying! Empty talk, without a doubt; for Britain is hurrying with all possible haste, rushing with all possible speed, scrambling headlong with the utmost eagerness. Such was the news that

reached Sidqi Pasha last Friday in Alexandria, where he was working, or resting, or working and resting. And such is what the newspapers told us on Saturday morning; and so Egypt was reassured that her dear ally meant her no harm, and that there was nothing to fear from any delay in the negotiations. And people spent Saturday believing that the affairs of the two beloved governments — Sidqi Pasha's government in Cairo and Mr. Attlee's government in London — were proceeding exactly as both wished, for Almighty God joins hearts together even when they are at odds, and brings souls into harmony even when they are far apart, and kindles love between the government of capital in Egypt and the government of socialism in London, and draws opposite to opposite and contrary to contrary. And so no lover was ever so longing for his beloved as the government of capital in Egypt longed for the government of socialism in London, and no suitor was ever so smitten with his beloved as the government of socialism in London was smitten with the government of capital in Cairo.

And for this reason people in Egypt and in Great Britain were reassured, last Saturday, that the two beloveds were hastening to meet after their long separation, and that the two lovers were hastening to be united after their bitter estrangement. But the sun sets and then it rises again, and behold, the slanderers had spoiled everything, and the gossips had postponed what rightly called for haste, and the watchers had sown discord between the two lovers just as Satan sows discord between a man and his own soul. So Great Britain remained in no hurry at all, choosing no negotiators, naming none, appointing none, sending none — sending only her ambassador. While Egypt, meanwhile, hurries, and overdoes the hurrying, and rushes, and goes to extremes in the rushing, burning her ships behind her and setting the Egyptian people entirely at naught, choosing her negotiators from the very smallest handful after having proved unable to choose them from the great multitude. And how swiftly the situation changed, until her tongue, in no small sorrow and dejection, began to recite the words of Omar ibn Abi Rabi'a:

*And we brought near the means of his desire, to one so love-smitten that
he measures by the forearm every time we measure by the finger.*

And this love-smitten one, of course, is none other than Sidqi Pasha himself, to whom and to whose colleagues Great Britain brought the means of their desire near, so that he took to measuring by the forearm every time Mr. Attlee or Mr. Bevin measured by the finger. It is enough simply to look and see that Egypt has taken vast, sweeping strides, as

though they were the strides of giants, along the path toward negotiation. How many times has our ambassador crossed the reaches of the sky between London and Cairo, and between the embassy and the ministry in London! And how much effort has Sidqi Pasha himself expended, and how much effort has he loaded upon the nation itself, to prepare for the negotiations and create the proper climate for them! And how much sleep has Sidqi Pasha driven from his own eyes, and from the eyes of others, to put together the negotiating delegation! He has not measured by the forearm but by many forearms together. Meanwhile Great Britain has remained calm and asleep — or as good as asleep — choosing no negotiators at all, but choosing only her ambassador. And scarcely had she chosen her ambassador when he fell ill — or perhaps he was already ill before she chose him. And his recovery grew slow in coming to the ambassador's aid, and the physicians began making excuses for their patient, some permitting him a partial recovery, others insisting that he continue to wait.

And meanwhile Egypt went on measuring by the forearm, and by the forearm, and by the forearm again, until she grew weary of measuring, and then God at last permitted Great Britain to measure a single finger's breadth, no more, and sent us her ambassador.

And so people woke up last Sunday to find the telegraph companies contradicting Sidqi Pasha most emphatically, insisting that Great Britain had not chosen her negotiators, and was in no hurry to choose them, and might perhaps have no need to choose them at all, for the ambassador alone would suffice. And some men, after all, are worth tens, or hundreds, or sometimes thousands of other men, and the ambassador might well be one of those men who, singly, are worth tens or hundreds of others. What matters is that the newspapers and the telegraph companies contradicted on Sunday what Sidqi Pasha had affirmed on Saturday.

And Al-Ahram was cunning and clever about it, for it had, as is its weekly custom, suspended publication on Saturday; and when it appeared on Sunday, it took the short road for its readers, presenting them with Sidqi Pasha's statement and Reuters' statement side by side, without comment, being always most careful to remain neutral.

And the week has passed, or very nearly passed, and everything proclaims that Great Britain has not yet chosen her negotiators. And a return to truth is better than persisting in error. And Sidqi Pasha has

shown that he knows how to profit from the wisdom of the wise, and how to make use of the verse of the poets, for he decided, two or several days ago, that he would treat the journalists after the fashion of Abda, Bashar's beloved, in the famous verse:

*And when I said to her, "Be generous with us," she escaped, through
silence, from either "no" or "yes."*

And so he announced to the journalists that he would say nothing at all to them about the negotiations until the matter had come to an end, whether in heaven or in hell.

All this, and the negotiations have not even begun; they remain a secret among the secrets of the unseen. And still Egypt — God forgive me — still the Egyptian government stands wandering and bewildered, measuring by the forearm every time Great Britain measures by the finger; and yesterday she measured out many forearms, while Great Britain measured not a finger, nor even part of a finger. For the British ambassador arrived yesterday at Port Said, and then at Cairo, and readers have of course seen in the newspapers how the ambassador was received at Port Said and at Cairo. And readers know that negotiating ministers arrive in Egypt every day representing various other states, and they are never received with anything like such a reception, nor anything close to it, nor shown such celebration. So what is it that distinguishes this British ambassador — who has not even yet presented his credentials — from all the other ministers and ambassadors, by the standard of an independent country that wishes to complete its independence, and refuses to recognize any special standing for any state at all?

Does the reader not see that Sidqi Pasha continues to measure by the forearm every time Great Britain measures by the finger? Will Sidqi Pasha not agree with me that the new British ambassador arrived just as any other state's representative arrives, and that he ought therefore to have been received just as any other state's representative is received, no more and no less? That would have been far more fitting to make Great Britain feel that we believe in independence as a reality, not merely an appearance, and far more fitting to make the British ambassador feel that we enter the negotiations as free men, bound by nothing at all — entering them as an equal enters negotiation with an equal, not as a lesser party enters negotiation with a greater one. Courtesies will be mentioned, no doubt! But Great Britain has no more claim than any other state to be singled out for special courtesies, least of all in these days. Yet Sidqi

Pasha, or whatever voice speaks on Sidqi Pasha's behalf, cannot help but recall the words of Ibn Abi Rabi'a:

*And we brought near the means of his desire, to one so love-smitten that
he measures by the forearm every time we measure by the finger.*

When will Egypt be granted the chance to measure a single finger every time Great Britain measures a finger, and to learn that moderation in courtesy is the noblest distinction a noble homeland can possess?