

Awaken

Kawkab al-Sharq, 23 April 1933

I know of no people like this Egyptian people: enduring the most grievous hardships that any people can endure, expending the utmost effort that any people can expend, bearing the heaviest burdens that any people can bear — smiling through it all, content with it all, faithful in it all. And yet, for all it endures and gives and bears, it receives in return nothing but ingratitude and thanklessness, nothing but contempt and disparagement!

The foreigner arrives in Egypt poor and indigent, and before long he is wealthy after his poverty and prosperous after his want. The foreigner arrives in Egypt already wealthy and comfortable, and before long his fortune has doubled and his share of prosperity has grown. The foreigner arrives in Egypt ignorant, and before long he has become a man of learning — or if already a man of learning, before long he has become one of the foremost and most distinguished scholars.

Rarely does a foreigner set foot on Egyptian soil to find the paths of livelihood narrow before him, or the doors of hope shut in his face, or Egypt turning him away in despair and disappointment. The Egyptian exerts himself to the utmost, and beyond, to enrich the foreigner after poverty, to set his mind at ease after fear, to satisfy him after resentment — only to receive from the foreigner nothing but ingratitude and thanklessness, nothing but contempt and humiliation.

This foreigner chafes at Egypt because its climate troubles him in summer, even as he enjoys it in winter. This foreigner chafes at Egypt because its need for industrial effort, elaborate amenity, and care for public health has remained acute and pressing — even though he it is who has monopolised its resources, who has arrogated to himself the management of its wealth and its commerce, who has overseen the administration of its every affair. The responsibility for what he complains of rests upon him before it rests upon anyone else.

This foreigner chafes at Egypt's ignorance, even though he was invited to take charge of its educational affairs and was granted for this

purpose a remuneration he could not have dreamed of in his own country. Not once did he set foot in Egypt without failing to give his work its due, without parcelling out to the Egyptians of his knowledge — little or much — only by measure, without ceasing for a single moment to harbour the thought that imparting knowledge to Egyptians is a danger: for it would dispel their ignorance, lift the darkness from them, make them his equals, perhaps render them independent of him, perhaps impel them to grow weary of him and to perceive the deliberate neglect and dereliction he practises.

Examine the foreigner's life in Egypt from any angle and along any of its paths, and you will find it always resting upon this principle: take from the Egyptians as much as you can, and as greatly as you can. Show the Egyptians affection and sympathy, while harbouring for them contempt and disdain. And when your need of them is cut off, reveal to them what you had been concealing, and lay bare before them what you had been hiding!

And so it is: you encounter the foreigner in Egypt and sense in him wit, warmth, and conviviality — then the tie between you and him is severed, and an opportunity arises for him to speak of you, and he will say nothing but ill!

Such is Egypt's condition with the foreigner, and Egypt's condition with certain Egyptians is no better than its condition with foreigners. An Egyptian displays some degree of competence and ability, and how quickly Egypt is captivated by him, how quickly it surrounds him with every variety of care and attention and every manner of encouragement and support, until he becomes a man of consequence and attains a conspicuous and distinguished social standing. And then he forgets those who nurtured and tended him, those who supported and encouraged him, those who raised him to his visible station and installed him in his distinguished rank. He thinks of himself before thinking of them, he attends to his own interests before attending to theirs, and he becomes an egoist of the first order — knowing only himself, working only for himself, regarding the people as nothing more than an instrument that alerts the obscure, elevates the lowly, and delivers men to whatever

advantages, ends, and ambitions they seek.

And he feels no scruple, if some measure of power is made available to him, against making that power a means to personal gain — even if this obliges him to ingratitude and thanklessness, and to the humiliation of the very people that raised him from weakness and brought his name to prominence from obscurity.

You may examine the lives of a great many senior officials and you will find them built upon this principle: deceive the people for as long as you need to deceive them; and when you have reached your goal and realised your ambition, extract for yourself whatever advantage you can, and secure for yourself whatever end you seek — and beware lest your fidelity to the people stand as an obstacle between you and anything you desire!

There are cabinets whose members were nothing before the reins of government were placed in their hands. No sooner do they begin attending their offices and their bureaux than they forget their recent past and their inevitable future, and office distracts them from everything save the pleasures of office, rank, and power. They revel in these pleasures, indulge in them immoderately, and sacrifice much for their sake — least of all the interests of the people that raised them to ministerial office to be its servants, and nothing more.

Thus does God will for this calm and gentle people — vigorous and strong though it is — to be the plaything of those to whom it shows kindness and upon whom it bestows its favours and benefactions. It feels this ingratitude at times, resents it, and chafes under it — but before long it has forgotten it and turned away. When it resents, it is restrained in its resentment; when it chafes, it is indulgent in its chafing. And so those who wrong it, deny its merit, and repay its beneficence with injury take no heed of its resentment or its suffering. When it forgets, it forgets utterly — rarely does it remember, rarely does it reflect.

Its adversaries exploit the shortness of its memory and the breadth of its forbearance, and so they go to excess in injuring it, and sink ever deeper into contemning it, neglecting it, and abandoning all thought of it.

By this alone can you explain the deplorable life we lead, in which evil assails us from every direction and calamities besiege us from every side. If those in whose hands our political affairs rest understood that when they took charge of our affairs they did not do so for themselves, but for a people; that by virtue of their offices and their position they are not our masters but our servants; that by virtue of their offices and their position they ought not to humiliate us or exploit us, but rather to humble themselves in the service of their nation's interests and to harness their efforts for the benefit of their country —

if those in whose hands our political affairs rest understood this, then none of them would have transgressed, none of them would have dealt unjustly, rights would not have been squandered, dignities would not have been violated, and freedom would not be meeting what it meets in these days. And if the people's memory were not so short, and if the people's forbearance were not so excessive, these politicians would be compelled to think of the people and to reckon with it, and so to restrain their souls from their appetites and drive them towards moderation, justice, equity, and gratitude.

And if the foreigners who come to Egypt esteemed their rights and duties in Egypt as they esteem them in their own countries, and listened to their consciences in Egypt as they listen to their consciences in their own countries, Egypt would not receive from them what it receives of this outward affection and this covert ingratitude. And if Egypt were not so utterly given over to forbearance, nor so excessively prone to forgetting, nor so recklessly negligent of its rights and its dignity, the foreigner would not have coveted it, nor would he have found a way to deceive and scheme against it.

And if Egypt, when it hungered, were wearied by hunger, and if Egypt, when it thirsted, were wearied by thirst, there would not be among us these events that the economic crisis has begun to bring about — events that are beginning to appear trivial, yet are for all that terrible and frightening, portending an evil whose hideous consequences none but God can know.

These grave diseases of hunger and destitution have begun to manifest themselves in Cairo in an alarming and terrifying form. Typhus fever prowls among the destitute poor spreading its evil and its ruin. And these destitute poor carry the fever with them as they make their way to their doctors at Qasr al-‘Aynī Hospital, seeking to ward off its harm — only to find the harm mightier than the doctors; and the doctors themselves are falling into the snares of the fever and being transported to hospital alongside their patients; and the students of the Faculty of Medicine are not escaping the fever either, but falling into its snares as well.

This is the disease invading the citadel of medicine and forcing it onto the defensive, when it should be this very citadel that sends its armies into the quarters of the poor and the destitute to combat the evil and the harm within them, and to repel the armies of epidemics and disease. But where is the path to this, when those in whose hands the management of the people's wealth rest do not think of the people? And where is the path to this, when those charged with protecting the people's health do not think of the people? Both one party and the other think first of their offices, then of consolidating their hold upon those offices, then of savouring the pleasures and prestige of those offices — and only then, after all this and all that, of the people.

Where is the path to this, when the Egyptian has grown accustomed to hungering and enduring hunger, to thirsting and enduring thirst, to being destitute and making peace with destitution? Dereliction on the part of those in authority towards the people, and dereliction on the part of the people towards itself. The fever profits from the dereliction of those in authority and from the dereliction of the people, ravaging the poor and besieging the doctors — just as the foreigner profits from the dereliction of those in authority towards the people and from the dereliction of the people towards itself, playing havoc with the people's rights, liberties, wealth, and every element of its national life — and then mocking all Egyptians for good measure!

All of this was in my thoughts when I read in the newspapers this morning that the ailing Prime Minister has set the date of his departure

for medical treatment abroad: he will travel in the middle of next month and spend some four months in Europe. Before this, the Prime Minister was ill for two months during which he accomplished nothing. In the interval between his illness and his departure he began attending his bureau slowly and reluctantly, by reason of his illness, and has barely managed to accomplish anything. And before all of this, he spent some three months in Europe convalescing and taking the cure — while throughout all of this he has retained the premiership, left the machinery of the Prime Ministry idle, and paralysed the country's interests — because he is travelling for recreation, or because he is ill, or because he is in convalescence, or because he is travelling for medical treatment.

If the Prime Minister truly esteemed his country's claim upon him, he would not have permitted himself to retain his office while incapable of discharging it. And if the Egyptians truly esteemed their own rights, they would not have accepted from their Prime Minister that he monopolise the premiership and perform its duties for only three or four months out of a full year. But the source of all evil in Egypt is that the people is forbearing — excessively forbearing — and that its rulers go to excess in exploiting this forbearance, caring nothing for the people and giving it no thought!

When will the people awaken to its rights and apply itself diligently to demanding and safeguarding them? And when will the consciences of its rulers awaken and restrain their possessors from the transgressions and negligences in which they embroil themselves?!