

Wretchedness

□□□□ □□□□□, 12 May 1933

A group of deputies — said to number a third of the Chamber — wish to interpellate the government on the subject of taxes, finding them, as the public finds them, a burden too crushing for landowners to bear. They recount that the Prime Minister himself declared in a communiqué that taxes consume half the income wrested by proprietors from their land after toil and hardship, after drudgery and exhaustion.

Others say the figure exceeds half and may reach two-thirds. Both camps maintain that the government once pledged to reduce these taxes; both camps then maintain that the government broke its pledge and left the taxes untouched — for the government will brook no outcome but that these taxes be collected in full, without abatement and without concession. If the peasant pays what is owed, well and good; if not, God did not create the whip in vain — He created it to labour upon the backs of those who evade their debt to the government. And God Almighty did not create prisons in vain — He created them to receive among their inmates those who delay, whether from incapacity or evasion, the discharge of what they owe the government. And God Almighty did not create the police in vain — He created them to bind with ropes and drag through the mud those who are unable, or affect inability, to pay what they owe the government.

And so long as the Ministry stands in need of money, and so long as the people are bound — whether capable or not — to furnish the government with what it requires, the government must demand and the people must pay. It is mere importunity and embarrassment to call upon the government to show leniency, for God did not create governments for leniency; and it is mere importunity and embarrassment to wish ease upon the peasant and a lightening of his burdens, for God did not create the peasant to be eased or relieved — He created him to suffer, and to suffer always; to lament, and to lament always; that his groaning might endure through the ages and become a faithful image of his long and melancholy history.

The government's need for money knows no end, for it has civil servants who must be paid — paid at multiples of what their counterparts in other countries receive — and whose salaries must be raised by special dispensation, even when the government has sworn on its most solemn

oaths to abolish such dispensations. And so long as civil servants exist, and so long as these civil servants draw salaries, and so long as those salaries admit of indefinite extension, the government may demand and the peasant must pay — for God created men so that some might drain the blood of others, and some find happiness in the misery of others. Nor does the government need money merely to pay its servants; it needs money also to service its debt, and to service that debt in gold if it cannot contrive to satisfy its creditors in paper. The government cannot afford to falter in servicing its debt, for that would anger the foreigners and cause them to think ill of us. The peasant's wretchedness and his suffering, his hunger and his thirst, his exposure to lethal epidemics and devastating diseases born of hunger, thirst, and deprivation — all of this is easier to bear, and of lesser consequence, than the anger of the foreigner and the ill opinion the foreigner forms of us.

And why not! This is a feeling natural to every human being. There are those among us who endure hunger and deprivation, preferring them to allowing the least sign of disordered dress or straitened circumstance to appear upon them; and so they purchase their reputation at the cost of hunger's torment and thirst's sting. What holds for individuals must hold for nations. Let us therefore be poor, let us be destitute, let hunger and disease ravage us — but the foreigner must believe, and must always believe, that we are wealthy and prosperous and capable of paying in gold when we cannot contrive to satisfy him in paper.

We must purchase our reputation at any price — even at the cost of exposing masses of people to typhus and kindred epidemics and diseases. And since the foreigner supposes us capable, he may demand and we must pay; if we balk or show the least inclination to balk, that is treason and an exposure of the country's reputation to peril. And since we have a reputation that must be preserved, let it be preserved in all its aspects and shielded in all its forms and manifestations.

Let the Prime Minister therefore travel to Europe to take the waters, and let all the pomp and magnificence befitting a land of Pharaohs attend him on his journey and his cure! Otherwise the foreigner will think us poor! He will accuse us of distress! Death and annihilation are preferable to the foreigner seeing us as we are — impoverished and beleaguered, unable to find what we need to feed our children and educate them.

These are things that must remain a secret sealed between ourselves. This is a fire we must endure and burn in without the foreigner perceiving or sensing it! Otherwise our reputation is lost and our dignity exposed to peril!

Among the outward signs of reputation indispensable to a noble independent nation is that our Boy Scouts should travel to Budapest — crossing the sea, traversing the land, spending thousands — so that foreigners may say: How great is Egypt's share of civilisation and wealth! She has a Scout troop like other countries, and she sends it to Europe for all to see. And the foreigner must not be permitted to learn that the fathers of these boys whom the government dispatches to Budapest may be writhing with hunger, and may be unable to feed their other children.

Among the outward signs of this reputation that must be kept inviolate and preserved is that we should have a theatre with dancing in it, and singing in it, and dramatic performances in it, where foreigners may freely come and go and enjoy whatever pleasures it offers. And the dancers, male and female, and the singers, male and female, and the actors and actresses, and the foreigners who frequent it, must not be permitted to learn that the Ministry of Education spends upon them whatever it spends, while expelling our children from the schools because their fathers cannot find the means to pay!

These are secrets that must remain sealed between ourselves. We suffer them, we lament them, we groan under the severity of the pain and the heat of complaint — but we are peasants! And was the peasant created for any purpose but to suffer and to lament and to groan?! And what would the peasant's life be if it were not an unceasing groan through the ages, a faithful image of his long and melancholy history?!

How fitting it would be for these fifty-odd deputies who have tabled an interpellation to abandon it — for they are attempting something that admits of no remedy and holds no promise!

Where is the courage that would allow the Ministry to address the question of taxes — to subject civil servants' salaries to reduction and lay bare the truth of our condition to those who regard us as a careful shepherd regards his flocks, their udders swollen with rich, sweet milk?

There is no hope that taxes will be touched or reduced; there is not even hope that the interpellation will be heard. It will be postponed indefinitely unless its authors withdraw it; and if they refuse indefinite postponement, they will be told: exercise tact and refinement, remember that the Prime Minister is travelling, remember that he is ill — and that in his capacity as head of government he is also Finance Minister, the one person who can say yes or no on this matter. Show therefore a little consideration, a little courtesy, a little regard for convention! Wait until the Prime Minister returns!

The interpellating deputies will hear these words, and a love of tact will overtake them, and compassion for the ailing traveller will seize them, until they prefer to oblige the Prime Minister rather than hasten to the peasant's rescue. The peasant has endured for years; let him endure a few months more. The taxes will remain as they are, and the peasant will suffer under them as he suffers under their fire today! The peasant will groan, tormented by two fires: the fire of the scorching summer burning his skin, and the fire of hunger and grief burning his liver! The peasant is patient — he was created to bear hardship and to stand firm against misfortune!

As for me, I care nothing for whether the taxes are reduced or not. What concerns me is that the peasant should feel the full measure of the wretchedness that surrounds him.