A Complaint

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Is it a complaint, or a defence? This statement dispatched by the Prime Minister from his summer retreat to the Daily Telegraph, and circulated in the Egyptian press since yesterday, breathes the spirit of complaint and the spirit of defence at once. In any case it ill befits the powerful and august position, the lofty and impregnable station, that the Prime Minister occupies. There must have been some pressing necessity that compelled the Prime Minister to write these words, even though he had gone to his summer retreat to rest; that necessity may be political in nature, but a necessity it is, in any case.

The rule is that prime ministers do not lower themselves to sparring with newspapers, whatever those newspapers may be, or with their correspondents, whoever those correspondents may be. They engage with their peers and equals and counterparts — fellow prime ministers, leaders of peoples, guides of opinion, and pillars of statesmanship. When newspapers publish something that does not accord with the truth or does not accord with the pleasure of prime ministers, there are other avenues of reply available besides the one our Prime Minister has taken: there are the background briefings passed to newspaper correspondents and reporters — semi-official communiqués, as they call them — carrying whatever rebuttal one wishes to circulate. There are the official statements issued by the central authority in the capital, or by the legation or embassy in the foreign country. As for the Prime Minister himself, he should be the last to speak; and if he must speak, he should not do so in this direct manner, but rather summon to his presence such journalists and broadcasters as may ask him about what has been said, and let the Prime Minister answer as he sees fit.

These — as we and the public well know — are the conventions that prime ministers observe, in order to preserve the prestige due to their ministries, nay to their states, and the dignity that ministries and states must maintain if they are to stand above such petty disputations. Yet the Daily Telegraph's correspondent, as readers will recall, alleged that the present Ministry has squandered its prestige and shaken public confidence in it and regard for it. The Prime Minister evidently wished to refute the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, but contrived to furnish him instead with manifest evidence that he had not greatly erred in alleging that the present Ministry has failed to guard its prestige as it

ought. Those who watch Sidqi Pasha's responses to the opinions of political circles in London may observe that since his illness he has grown sensitive — exquisitely sensitive to those opinions — provoked by everything, driven by everything not merely to speech but to action and agitation in action.

Readers will recall — without a doubt — the story of the telegraphic dispatch sent to Al-Balagh and published by Al-Ahram, which threw the Ministry into turmoil: the Prime Minister spoke about it in London, then denied any such communication; he spoke of it in confidence to his colleagues and they divulged the conversation, whereupon he denied it; Al-Ahram challenged him, and the Prime Minister was forced into silence.

Readers will recall this without a doubt, and will appreciate that the weakness to which illness has reduced our Prime Minister is what must bear responsibility for this headlong rush to speak and to act at moments when silence and stillness would better serve. The press has reported that no sooner did the Ministry here catch sight of the letter published by the Daily Telegraph than it showed extravagant concern over it, and hastened to the Prime Minister who was summering and taking the cure and resting, to inform him of the letter — perhaps depicting to him the effect it had produced in ministerial minds and ministerial circles; perhaps that depiction was measured, perhaps it was exaggerated; in any case it alarmed the Prime Minister and compelled him to forsake his rest and forsake his silence and stillness.

The Ministry here deserves a measure of reproof for having disturbed its exhausted chief and drawn him from the repose and calm that were his due. The Ministry here deserves a measure of blame for having, in turning to its chief, compelled him to furnish the Daily Telegraph's correspondent with plain evidence of the Ministry's weakness when its chief is absent from it — for had it not complained to him of that correspondent it would not have done so — and of the Ministry's weakness even when its chief participates in its work after his illness — for had it not done so the Prime Minister would not have hastened to reply personally to the Daily Telegraph's correspondent.

Both the friends and the adversaries of Sidqi Pasha have the right to observe that the Ministry has been excessive in its treatment of itself when it resorted to its resting chief and compelled him to this reply. Had it spared him and attended to the reply itself, it might well have contrived

something better than what the Prime Minister said — for its members residing in Egypt are, praise be to God, in good health: God has vouchsafed them the means of vigour and energy, of precision in argument and in thought. Had the Ministry itself written this reply, it would have avoided — we venture to think — any need to invoke justice and fair-mindedness.

A strong, proud, independent, and dignified ministry has no need to remind a foreign newspaper — even an English one, even the Daily Telegraph — of justice or fair-mindedness; nor has it any need to appeal to a foreign newspaper for the mercy and sympathy that justice and fair-mindedness entail. What it is fit to do is to deny what the foreign correspondent says with force and resolve, with pride and defiance — the kind of pride and defiance the Prime Minister himself displayed in his historic reply to Mr MacDonald when that gentleman presumed to meddle in Egypt's affairs, and the Prime Minister sent him packing with his celebrated historic rejoinder and forced him into silence. Had the Ministry itself written this reply, it would not have needed to affirm — as Sidqi Pasha felt compelled to affirm — that Egypt is tranquil and at ease and that he himself is at ease with this tranquillity and composure. For his concern, sick as he is, far away as he is, a resident of a foreign land, with replying to a letter from a foreign correspondent, gives no indication that he is at ease or serene of mind.

Had the Ministry itself written this reply, it would have thought long and hard before invoking tranquillity — for a ministry that invokes tranquillity and stability does not cancel the leave of district officers and police chiefs throughout the summer, does not train the police in the open suppression of demonstrations, does not besiege houses and bar visitors from them, does not assign guards to stand watch around Nokrashi's house in shifts — one detail by night, another by day. And the Ministry knows full well that the English eye is open and sees, and the English ear is open and hears, and that Mr Keane Boyd is acquainted with all of this at first hand.

Had the Ministry itself written this reply, it would have proceeded with the utmost caution before praising its own conduct in alleviating the crisis and lifting hardship from the peasants — for it knows, and the English know along with it, that no hardship has been lifted from the peasants and no injury removed from them; rather, their assets are being seized, their livestock sold, and hunger keeps watch over them day and

night, everywhere. And had the Ministry itself written this reply, it would not have stumbled into the contradiction into which the Prime Minister was driven by fatigue and weakness, when he claimed that his absence and his presence are one and the same and make no difference to Egyptian policy — a claim that amounts to an admission by the Prime Minister that his continued tenure in power is a futility, a species of the art of clinging to power for power's sake alone, and nothing else. For if his presence and his absence are the same even when he is ill, why does he not resign? And if any other person is equally capable of conducting the affairs of government, why does he inflict hardship upon himself and upon the people? And had the Ministry itself written this reply, it would not have said what the Prime Minister said about the Wafd, nor would it have gone as far as the Prime Minister went in an excess that does not invite outright laughter but rather a faint smile — when he claimed to the Daily Telegraph that the Egyptians are unanimous in repudiating Wafd rule and refusing any return to it, because Wafd rule is the source of chaos and disorder. This is the kind of thing one might say to China — to those peoples lost in obscurity in the unknown corners of the earth. As for the Europeans who see us and whom we see, who read us and whom we read, who visit us and whom we visit — as for the English who know our affairs as well as we do, or better — one ought not to say such things to them, unless it be fatigue that prompted the saying or embarrassment that drove him to it.

You will see, then, that the Ministry has been excessive in its treatment of itself and of the Prime Minister when it informed him of this letter and turned to him to lift its affliction and ward off its harm. Excessive in its treatment of itself and of the Prime Minister — because it exhausted the Prime Minister when he was in need of rest; because it chose as its advocate a man whose health in these days does not permit him to mount an effective defence; because it devoted more attention to this letter than it merited. What, in any case, is the worth of this letter, and what is the worth of its author? What is the worth of the Daily Telegraph? And what, indeed, is the worth of all the English combined, so long as the Ministry basks in the full confidence of Parliament and the satisfaction of His Majesty the King? The Ministry's and the Prime Minister's preoccupation with this letter is causing far more agitation of opinion than the letter itself could produce. It is driving people to say among themselves: were this letter not pointing to something, betraying a secret, hinting at matters of consequence, the Ministry and its chief would not have been so alarmed by it — and why would the telegraph and

telephone wires between Egypt and England and France have crackled so? It is not in the Ministry's interest for people to say such things among themselves. The truly advantageous course for a ministry is to meet this letter and its like with composure, silence, and indifference. But how is the Ministry to find all this, with its chief ill and, ill as he is, far away — summering in some corner of Europe?

I confess that I paid no attention to the Daily Telegraph letter until I learned and observed that the Ministry was devoting excessive attention to it, and that the Prime Minister was breaking his silence and his rest on its account, and announcing at the end that he holds the letter's author in high regard, yet is certain that his work is far from well-intentioned. And who knows? Perhaps this ill intent is not the fault of the Daily Telegraph's correspondent but rather the fault of political circumstances, which sometimes lend their support to ministries — and are extravagant in their support — and sometimes abandon ministries — and are extravagant in their abandonment. Justice and fair-mindedness would therefore perhaps suggest that the Prime Minister ought not to complain about the Daily Telegraph's correspondent to that correspondent's newspaper, but rather to complain about political circumstances to political circumstances — for they are what shift and change; they are what draws one near to power and drives another from it; they are what brings the distant close and removes the near to a distance; and they are what may yet reveal what the Daily Telegraph's correspondent has hinted at, when autumn comes, or before autumn comes.