Fasting

Kawkab al-Sharq, 26 May 1933

It is beyond doubt that when the court sentenced Tawfiq Diab to prison, it never intended to sentence him to illness, nor to expose him to illness. It is beyond doubt that it never intended to sentence him to torment, nor to expose him to torment. It is beyond doubt that it intended only to send him to prison to remain there for some months, and then to emerge and resume his life among the living — not to remain there until mistreatment brought him to the brink of illness, then delivered him to despair, then drove him to fasting, then brought him at last to where God alone knows, and to where people well know the fate the wasting, sick man drives himself to, once he persists in fasting and refuses food and drink.

It is beyond doubt that the court never intended any of this, nor should it ever intend such a thing; and it is beyond doubt that the Prisons Department was not established to expose the healthy to illness, nor to drive the sick toward mortal sickness and pains that consume life. And yet a sick man has been handed over to the Prisons Department — a man whose illness is neither obscure nor unknown, and whose illness is not among those maladies subject to doubt, over which physicians might differ in their description and assessment. It is, rather, a well-known illness, on which the physicians have already recorded their opinions, opinions which were submitted to the Prisons Department — and these were recorded not by obscure physicians, but by a recognized group, among them a professor at the official Institute of Medicine in Egypt, whose word ought surely to be heard and given due weight. And yet, with all this, it is said that the Prisons Department paid no heed to the sick man's illness, nor to the physicians' opinions, until it was forced to do so, when it saw in the prisoner's own condition something that obliged it to grant him some measure of care.

And it is said that the Prisons Department was unwilling to continue this care of its sick prisoner, since it saw his condition improve somewhat, and saw him gaining some measure of recovery, and so restored him to the condition of ordinary prisoners — this despite knowing, from the physicians' own findings, that he would return, beyond any doubt, to his acute and wasting illness within a matter of days.

Does the Prisons Department wish us to understand that it takes some pleasure in the suffering of prisoners, and finds it a fitting completion of punishment to shuttle them between health and sickness, between comfort and pain — leaving them until the inevitable illness strikes them, or the illness that never leaves them grows severe, and only then troubling itself with them, granting them some small mercy of treatment, until, once their condition has improved a little, restoring them to whatever harms and corrupts them, moving them back and forth in this manner: treating them so that they may fall ill, and making them ill so that they may be treated; drawing them out of the fire only to cast them back into it, and casting them into it only to draw them out again.

It was not for this that the Prisons Department was established, nor for this that prisons themselves were established; and no government that values any measure of its own dignity, or aspires to any measure of respect, could ever be content with such a thing. Or does the Prisons Department wish us to understand that it treats its wards with pure mechanical process, devoid of understanding or discernment, giving no thought to anything, applying nothing but a mechanical enforcement of regulation: so-and-so's condition has improved somewhat, and so he must be made to burn in the fire of ordinary treatment, until his condition worsens again, at which point he receives care once more — so that it attends to a prisoner only when it finds itself compelled to such attention! This is not how administrations ought to oversee the affairs of people; this is not how a system ought to be understood, nor how its principles and rules ought to be enforced.

Here is a man of whom medicine has said that he cannot be cured of his pain, or that his pain cannot be eased, except by a special regimen of life that the physicians have prescribed for him and laid out in detailed, unambiguous terms. It is the Prisons Department's plain duty to defer to the physicians' judgment, and to carry out what they have determined without hesitation or delay — unless, that is, the Prisons Department is bent on ensuring that people meet every manner of torment within its walls, and are exposed there to mortal danger!

And all this, without even mentioning that Tawfiq Diab did not kill, did not waylay travelers, did not steal, did not break into the homes of the peaceable, and did not commit any of those base offenses punished by the law alone — offenses that morality also punishes, and custom also punishes, whose evil traces cling to their author throughout his life, and cling to his name after his death. Tawfiq Diab committed none of these

offenses; he did nothing but a thing whose evaluation varies with circumstance, and varies with setting, a thing the law now condemns in Egypt, though it may not condemn it tomorrow, though it may not have condemned it in quite this way before, though it may not condemn it at all in many other countries, and though it may even be a source of honor for its author in certain settings, certain circumstances, certain ages. It is neither right, nor just, nor any regard for freedom of opinion, that this man should be treated as one treats those criminals who corrupt the earth, and whose sin of crime clings to them living and dead.

We have not raised this point again because we have already raised it, and pressed it, and others have raised it, and pressed it too, without anyone listening or anyone paying heed — until we despaired of the Government ever accepting or heeding it. We therefore hoped for nothing more than that the man be treated as a sick prisoner, whose pain might be eased if he received the care due him, even though his illness will not vanish. And the proof of this is that, when he was a free man, able to surround himself with every kind of care and treatment, relying in this care on the finest physicians, his illness never once left him for six full years — though it eased upon him at times, and grew heavy upon him at others. Does the Prisons Department, then, refuse the sick man the treatment due to the sick?

They say that Tawfiq Diab's condition has improved somewhat, and that he must therefore be made equal to the other prisoners, in enforcement of regulation; but equality between him and the other prisoners is a thing beyond reach, for he has not been cured of his illness — he is sick, while the other prisoners are healthy. The Prisons Department can only make him equal to them on the day nature itself makes him their equal, restoring his health to him whole, so that his physicians may record that this illness has left him and cleared from him entirely, and that he has been fully and completely cured. Until that day, the Prisons Department sins whenever it forces a sick and ailing man to endure what would be hard even for the healthy to bear.

It is said that a certain deputy submitted to his Chamber a proposal to reform the prison system, distinguishing crimes of opinion and publication from other crimes of aggression against rights, persons, and property; and it is said that some sympathy for this proposal was found among the deputies, and some inclination to accept and act upon it — but this proposal, submitted to the Chamber with such energy, had scarcely settled there before it was struck with stagnation and torpor, something

resembling death; no one mentioned it again, no one gave it further thought. And we are most likely not mistaken in having judged, from the moment this proposal was submitted, that the Chamber would attend to it only long enough to set it quietly aside — and it was not long before certain deputies themselves furnished the clearest proof that they had never been in earnest when they received this proposal!

Indeed, a certain deputy stood up some days ago to set the authorities against the press, blaming it for demanding that prisoners of opinion be treated as their counterparts are treated in civilized countries, and considering this demand on the part of the press an encouragement to wrongdoing, an incitement to fall into it. We understood well enough what the deputy meant, and knew that such men wish their adversaries neither good nor fairness, and feel no shame in thereby branding themselves with a rejection of civilization, and an excess in exactly what truly advanced countries hold themselves above.

We have, then, no hope in the deputies; the deputies are too preoccupied with their own affairs to concern themselves with the prisons or those within them, and the deputies are quite at ease, for God, it seems, has decreed that their own friends and supporters among the writers should never be brought before the courts, never enter a prison, never suffer any harm, so long as the matter rests in their own hands, and so long as power rests with their own Ministry. And the deputies are eager, meanwhile, that their adversaries should taste every manner of hardship and constraint, every kind of torment and punishment, in the hope that this might deter them from opposition and turn them away from criticism. Everything, then, invites the deputies to neglect this proposal and forget it until the present session comes to its close!

It is said that the press disliked the idea that journalists should be treated as Tawfiq Diab was treated, and so it protested and objected, met and met again, persisted in protest and objection, and all this culminated, at last, in a great triumph, a splendid success: it founded for itself a club, where it meets in the forenoon, meets in the afternoon, meets beneath the cover of night — and throughout these repeated meetings it neither plays nor idles, neither neglects nor falls short, speaking of nothing but its sick prisoner, of the bitter insult he and it together taste, of the pain and anguish he and it together endure — yet it speaks only to itself, hears only itself, exerts itself only within its own club. And whatever the case, no insult has been lifted from it, no dignity restored to it, no sanctity respected on its behalf, no wrong removed from it. And yet it remains

content and at ease, since it meets, and exerts itself, and talks. And what else, indeed, does it have the power to do, but meet, and exert itself, and talk?!

And so the Prisons Department turns away from its duty, so the deputies turn away from their duty, so the press turns away from its duty. As for Tawfiq Diab, illness weighs upon him until it wastes him away; and when some slight care restores to him a measure of health, he is returned to the very evil he was in before, so that he finds himself caught between an inescapable insult that never lifts — the insult of imprisonment for opinion, meeting the punishment of ordinary criminals — and a persistent illness whose pains ease only long enough to return heavy and exhausting once more, and a despair that first appears to him from afar, then draws nearer little by little, and nearer still, until it attaches itself to him and fills his isolation, his desolation, his solitude, the moment day breaks — and does day ever break for him except in pallor? And when night darkens, is the darkness of night for him anything but a continuation of the darkness of day? He looks about and sees nothing but illness and despair; he thinks, and finds nothing but illness and despair. Why, then, should he not free himself from illness? Why should he not free himself from despair? Why should he not set a limit to these torments, which people either refuse or are powerless to limit for him?

Why should he not shorten the distance between himself and that great rest, that all-encompassing calm which knows neither illness nor health, which knows neither despair nor hope, whose possessor needs neither the mercy of men, nor the justice of men, nor the chivalry of men — needing only the mercy of God alone, the justice of God alone, the compassion of God alone?

Why should he not sever the ties of this life, in which people find only wrong and injustice, in which people find only cruelty and harshness, in which people find themselves stripped even of dignity, and remiss even toward what ought to be held sacred? Why should he not renounce food and drink, and turn himself to unbroken fasting, that he might perhaps be delivered from all this misery?

And so it was that people began to say that Tawfiq Diab had begun this perilous fast the day before; and people asked after this news, and it was confirmed to them; and people asked the Government about this news, and it chose a vast and terrifying silence! The deputies heard this news, and said nothing of it! The papers heard this news, and broadcast it

and spread it, and called a meeting once Tawfiq Diab had fasted three days; and this news fell upon Tawfiq's household, and hearts were seized with alarm, and souls were struck with dismay, and tears streamed down; and despair descended upon that household which hope had filled for weeks, and settled there as a heavy, unwelcome guest!

Yes — despair settled into hearts it ought never to have reached, and despair veiled with grief faces upon which nothing ought ever to have appeared but cheerfulness, and a smile for life.

O God, bear witness that this wretched prisoner, his young children, and his friends do not deny the judiciary, nor dispute it, nor hesitate to submit to it with contentment and peace of mind; but they desire that justice which admits no doubt and no dispute — the justice that refuses to treat the sick man as the healthy, and refuses to treat the prisoner of opinion as the highway robber.