A Pledge

Kawkab al-Sharq, 9 March 1933

I confess that there is nothing I dread so much as people's approval of me, nothing I fear so much as their good opinion of me. For I — God is my witness — seldom find myself pleased with myself, or think well of myself; nor do I recall ever having written a single thing, or done a single thing, without believing it fell short of what I ought to have written, short of what I ought to have done, short of what ought to satisfy those friends — both the ones I know and the ones I do not — who are gracious enough to be pleased with me and think well of me, while I myself am powerless to credit that judgment, or to consider that approval justified.

So it has been with me ever since I began to write, ever since I began to take up some part of the burdens of public life, and so, it seems, it will remain with me forever. For I have passed beyond that stage of life in which a man can still revise his opinion of himself, think better of himself, and look forward to his own growth, advancement, and progress toward perfection.

For this reason, I do not know how I shall meet those friends who, learning that I would be writing for Al-Kawkab, welcomed the news and were pleased by it — some of them so warmly that they rejoiced and delighted in it. Nor, indeed, do I know how I shall meet those who did me the honor of inviting me to write for Al-Kawkab, and pressed me to do so with an insistence full of affection and goodwill, and a wish for what is good, both for me and for the readers of what I shall write.

Indeed, I do not know how I shall meet either the one group or the other, for I am deeply anxious that I may prove unable to live up to what either expects of me, or to fulfill, in small measure or great, what they anticipate. And yet I have answered the call of those who summoned me with gratitude, and accepted the approval of those who approved with delight, and have come forward to meet them all, confident and at ease in the knowledge that I have not yet attained what they hope and expect of me. I shall not, therefore, fall short of the utmost sincerity there is; I shall not weary of the fullest counsel there is; I shall not stint any strength I possess, nor any effort within my power — but shall spend it all, with honest judgment, firm resolve, and strong hope, in the finest readiness a man can show for meeting hardship and enduring pain, in the service of this grieving country.

Nor do I think that an Egyptian, in these days, possesses anything he can offer his homeland better than sincerity, sound counsel, true resolve, and a readiness to meet whatever hardship comes. If this is what the friends of Al-Kawkab and its readers expect of me, then they may already be confident they shall have what they want from it; and if they expect something else of me, let them forgive me if I promise them nothing more.

And what, indeed, can men of action offer Egypt in these days — days in which wings have been clipped, tongues bound so that they speak only by careful reckoning, pens curbed so that they move only by strict measure, and the people so constrained that they are forced to think, and think long, before speaking or writing, forced to weigh, and weigh long, before rousing themselves to any undertaking at all? Everything around us has grown narrow. For the Cabinet, from the moment it took up power — or from the moment it merely resolved to take up power — discovered that the Constitution was broader than it ought to be, and so it narrowed it, and went to excess in narrowing it. And no sooner had it announced this narrowing to us, taking us in hand to shrink our minds, curtail our tongues, curb our pens, and confine our hopes, to make our lives conform to this new Constitution, than it discovered that this same new Constitution still guaranteed us more freedoms than it ought — and so it set about narrowing these freedoms too, now through various legislative acts, now through its own administrative authority. And it took up scales of the most exacting precision, of the most excessive delicacy, of the sharpest, keenest sensitivity, by which to measure whatever we saw, said, and did, and to hold us accountable for whatever it, and it alone, disapproved of in all this — not for whatever custom disapproved, nor whatever the Constitution disapproved, nor whatever even the most jealous democracy might disapprove in its narrowness. And our every movement, coming and going, came to be watched, observed, and weighed, permitted or forbidden. And our words came to be interpreted rightly at times, wrongly at others. And our very thoughts came to be suspected; and everything we did was viewed with disfavor, and everything we refused to do was viewed with favor. And the weeks passed, and the months passed, and the Cabinet discovered that even this narrow enclosure with which it had surrounded us, in which it had confined us, was not enough — for our minds remained still broader than this enclosure, and our will remained still stronger than the Cabinet's authority. And so it became necessary to narrow our minds, weaken our will, and dissolve our resolve. And what means comes closer to achieving

this than narrowing education, and controlling it, and imposing upon it a harsh, oppressive supervision in all its branches and forms? And so let the Cabinet extend its authority — as indeed it has done — over education; let it gather it all unto itself, let it confine it entirely in its own hand, let it press it as hard as it can press, let it grasp it by whatever means it can find to grasp it.

Here are schools that once lay beyond its authority — these it must now shelter beneath its wing; and here are free schools where education might find a breadth it does not care for — for these let it draft laws to bring them back to whatever narrowness it desires. And here are the sons of the common people, flocking to education in ever greater numbers — let it prepare its arsenal to resist this dangerous flood. And what, indeed, could be more dangerous to an authority such as this, an authority that wishes to set no limit upon itself, than the people's eagerness for the higher branches of education?

Here is the Minister of Education, announcing before the Chamber of Deputies that secondary and higher education must be narrowed, because they are producing for Egypt more educated young men than is proper. Let us, then, expand primary education to combat illiteracy, and let us tighten our grip on secondary and higher education to reduce the number of the unemployed — on the surface of things — and to lessen, in the true state of things, the danger to an authority that wishes to know no bound. And let us abandon all thought that education, in all its various forms, is a right belonging to everyone alike, to be sought whenever and however each person wishes and is able, restrained by nothing but the examination itself and the capacity to bear its weight.

Yes — and let us abandon, too, all thought that the true advancement of any nation depends upon the spread of genuine culture, the kind young men find in secondary schools, in higher schools, and in the university; and that the true, denounced danger to the social and political order alike comes precisely from excess in the spread of compulsory education paired with neglect in the spread of higher education — for this combination produces, in any country, an army of half-educated, third-educated, or quarter-educated men, who do not see things as they truly are, nor judge them as they ought to be judged, and for whom this dangerous army of the half-cultured is never furnished with skilled leaders, drawn from the truly cultured, to turn it back from excess and guide it toward advancement and the good.

Let us abandon all thought of this. For there is something more important than all of it, graver in consequence than all of it: namely, that this unbounded authority should be able to absorb everything, to monopolize everything, and to direct the nation wherever it itself wishes — not wherever the nation's own hopes, interests, and highest ideals in life would lead it.

Everything around us has grown narrow, and it is no wonder that we have not advanced in this age in which we have been made to submit to this authority; the true wonder is that we have not regressed, but have held our ground exactly where we stood when God graced us with the present Cabinet. It is no wonder that our minds have not grown any broader, that our will has not grown any stronger, that we have not carved out for ourselves new paths in learning, in politics, and in the other branches of life; the true wonder is that our minds and our wills remain just as broad, just as strong, as they ever were, and that we still resist, and resist triumphantly, these various calamities that have been unleashed upon us from every direction, blocking off every path before us.

Yes — the best thing an Egyptian can offer his homeland in these days is simply sincerity in word and deed, honesty of judgment, firmness of resolve, strength to resist, and readiness to endure whatever misfortune comes. For in the struggle between us and the calamities that beset us, however long or short it may last, victory belongs only to the man of strong will, unwavering resolve, and the strength to resist.

And I pledge to those who shall read me that I shall be, in all of this, exactly as they would wish; and I do not think I can thank them for their welcome of me, and for the kindness of their reception, any better than by giving them this pledge upon myself.