Complaint

Kawkab al-Sharq, 16 May 1933

It was as though we had been inspired yesterday, when we set out to portray the condition of civil servants — the despair that toys with the spirits of some of them, the hope that plays with the spirits of others; the sorrow that fills some hearts, the joy that floods others; the misery that hangs over some households, the bliss that hovers over others; and all the rivalry this breeds among them, calling forth division, and the envy it breeds, calling forth hatred and scheming; and all the effect this has on the character of civil servants, corrupting their inclinations and their temperaments; and all the negligence in the conduct of business this in turn forces upon them — some turning to gloom and sorrow, then to despair and desolation; others turning to idle amusement and diversion, then to jesting and levity — while the interests of the state are lost somewhere between despair and hope, between the wretched and the pampered, between the miserable and the fortunate.

It was as though we had been inspired when we tried to set before people this sad, painful picture — one that ought never to exist in a civilized country, one that does Egypt no credit, raises her standing not one bit, and bears no witness for her ministry to the justice, fair dealing, integrity, and equity it ought to have been distinguished by.

Yes, it was as though we had been inspired when we tried to set before people this harmful, shameful picture of civil servants' lives under the shadow of favouritism and patronage, under the shadow of partiality toward private gain and the chasing of personal whims. We could not have known, as we set out this picture, that the very souls behind the affairs of these wretched officials were bound up with our own, complaining to us, dictating to us, calling on us for aid in raising their complaint before the people, laying their grievance before the nation, and stirring in people's hearts some measure of pity and sympathy for them — in the hope that this might console them for the government's injustice toward them, the government's indifference to them, and the ministry's imposition upon them of principles and rules that are as far from justice, and as sharply skewed from equity, as any rules could be.

Yes — even as we were setting out this picture yesterday, these wretched junior officials were going round to one another, standing beside one another, passing petitions from hand to hand — petitions filled

with complaint, filled with appeal, filled with a plea for justice, filled with a demand for their due, filled with a portrait of the misery they bear and the wrong they suffer — until, once they had finished drafting and signing these petitions, they submitted them to their superiors and waited. God alone knows how long they wait; God alone knows what it is they wait for. Will their wait be long or short? Will they win fairness, or will they win only deprivation and disappointed hope? Will the government listen to them, or will it stop its ears as though it had heard nothing at all?!

The voice of the weak and wretched is a powerful thing, capable of shaking hearts — but only if there is, in those hearts, some readiness for justice, some willingness to bow before what is right. As for the voice of the strong and fortunate, it has no need to be raised at all; it need not even pass beyond the throat and the lips, for between the hearts of its owners and the hearts of ministers and superiors run hidden, sensitive wires, quick to pulse, carrying what is in one heart straight to another. And so these strong, fortunate men rise in rank without ever having asked to rise, and receive more without ever having asked for more; and they are happy for no reason but that they are happy, and live in comfort for no reason but that they are comfortable!!

Yes — these wretched junior officials suffer, and drown in their suffering; they complain, and press their complaint; they plead, and grow ever more insistent in their pleading — yet no one listens to them, no one troubles over them, no one so much as turns to look at them, except when the need for economy arises, or when economy is merely wanted as a pretext; and then some of them are dismissed, some of them are cut, and the Buildings Department, say, dismisses fifty or a hundred of its inspectors at a stroke. But senior officials have no need to ask at all — indeed, they may have no need even to think of asking — for the government exempts them from every rule, excuses them from every restriction, promotes them and raises their pay without any accounting at all, because they are capable; and they are capable, simply because they are senior officials!!

And there is a certain class of officials, at once junior and senior, who have united two opposites, reconciled two contraries: junior in their posts, their grades, their salaries — yet close to ministers and superiors, and so blessed with the ministers' and superiors' favour that they sprout wings which lift them into the air, send them soaring into the sky, and carry them upward at astonishing speed to where they become senior among the senior, capable among the capable!

Here is the minister's secretary; here is the under-secretary's secretary; here is one working in so-and-so's office; here is one growing up in the shade of so-and-so — and woe to him if this chance fails to let him plunder the earth, and reach, in the shortest possible time, the shortest possible stretch of the race!

Here is the Prime Minister, forced by illness to travel abroad to convalesce and rest; and off he goes, taking with him a handful of junior officials, who work when he does not work, and grow weary alongside him when he rests, while the state spends its money on their travel, there and back, granting each one of them two pounds a day — that is, sixty pounds a month — for no reason at all except that they accompany the Prime Minister during his rest and his convalescence.

And while these officials accompanying the Prime Minister enjoy rest, pleasure, comfort, and a delightful change of climate, junior officials toil through the broad light of day, then return to their families, many of them not even knowing whether they will find anything to eat!

Yes — and while these officials accompanying the Prime Minister enjoy rest, pleasure, and a pleasant climate at the state's expense, livers are breaking and hearts are burning, and tears are being shed, because this very state, which spends so freely on the Prime Minister's comfort and that of his retinue, finds its schools too cramped for the hundreds of boys and young men who crowd them, so that they are turned away and left to wander the streets — their families powerless, unable to find the means to send them back to their schools and let them complete their academic year by sitting their examinations. And when the Minister of Education is asked in the Chamber of Deputies about the matter of these students, he tells the Chamber less than the truth, and deceives the Chamber with empty promises; and when the papers point out to him this discrepancy, and ask him to bring his words into line with his deeds, he stops his ears with his fingers, sets his cigarette between his lips, turns away, and persists in an arrogance beyond all bearing!!

Yes — and while the Prime Minister and his retinue enjoy their rest, and while senior officials enjoy these new grants bestowed on them last Thursday, and the Thursday after, junior officials must make do with deprivation, and with the hope that their condition might yet improve; and so they wait, and God alone knows how long they wait, and for what.

As for the peasant, he ought by rights to be the most fortunate of men, the most easy in mind, the most expansive in hope. He ought to

hang out decorations and beat the drums; he ought to dance, even if the Minister of Traditions disapproves of dancing; he ought to make merry, even if there is nothing in life to call for merriment; he ought to rejoice, because the Prime Minister would not set off on his travels without first sending him glad tidings that will bring him out of darkness into light, out of misery into bliss — the state is about to grant the peasant a million pounds, half of it to ease the burden of the guard tax, half of it to improve the state of the harvest.

But how, and when, and where? And who will benefit from this gift? And who will see it and never benefit from it at all? These are questions that demand an answer — but the answer will not come until you have waited; and God alone knows how long you will wait, and God alone knows what it is you are waiting for, and God alone knows where this million pounds will land among the needs of the millions of peasants, and God alone knows whether this million will vanish as other millions before it have vanished — or whether it might have some share in the blessing of Sheikh al-Inbabi, or of Saint Thérèse, and so bring some small relief, however slight, to the misery of the wretched and the distress of the afflicted...

What a life Egypt is made to live in these days — a life in which people's fortunes are divided among them by a reckoning whose very foundation is injustice.