Optimism . . .

Al-Wadi (Hadith al-Wadi), 7 June 1934

The truth is bitter, even when spoken by the sweetest-tongued of men, the most agreeable in manner, the most pleasant of nature, and the most generous of disposition. And the truth is bitter, even when its very wording announces nothing but good, calls to nothing but good, and throws open the doors of hope as wide as doors can be thrown open. The proof of this is this very statement which a Deputy made yesterday, in which he portrayed the truth in its most beautiful form — yet no sooner had it fallen upon the ears of the Deputies than a group of them rose up against it, so that the matter grew disordered, the affair grew grave, voices rose, the clamor intensified, and the Speaker of the Chamber was compelled to suspend the session, to grant the Deputies a respite, and to give the Prime Minister time to seek some way out of the predicament into which he had been pushed.

And this statement, which portrayed the truth in its most beautiful form and yet angered the Deputies most fiercely, was: “Optimism is better than pessimism, and the good course is to leave the question of the public debt to our wise government, to handle as it sees fit.”

The Deputies rose up at this statement and grew agitated; the Deputies were roused by this statement and seethed, and one of them cried out: “What use, then, is the Chamber of Deputies?” And the strange thing is that this uprising accomplished nothing, that this protest accomplished nothing, and that the Chamber of Deputies came, in the end, to believe that optimism is indeed better than pessimism, and that the good course is indeed to leave the question of the public debt to our wise government. So it left the question of the public debt to our wise government because it trusts it, is reassured by it, and believes it to be truly wise. But you ask: then why did the Chamber rise up against this Deputy who claimed that optimism is better than pessimism, and that the good course is to leave the question of the public debt to our wise government? The answer to this question is plain: the Chamber rose up because it had no choice but to rise up. For it wants optimism to be better than pessimism, but it does not want to declare this outright, or set it down as a formal record; it wants to leave the matter to our wise government — but only after a debate in which the exchange grows heated, voices rise, and disorder abounds.

Man is so made that he must believe in his own strength, however weak he may be, and must convince himself of his freedom, however coerced he may be. So people must be made to believe of the Deputies that they debate and dispute, and the Deputies themselves must be made to believe of themselves that they debate and dispute as well. And the Deputies did indeed debate and dispute yesterday, acquitting themselves admirably in argument and contention, and then became convinced that optimism is better than pessimism, and that the question of the public debt must be left to our wise government. And they likewise debated and disputed on Monday, and then became convinced that optimism is better than pessimism, and that the question of the Mixed Courts must be left to our wise government. And they will likewise go on debating and disputing, and will then become convinced, God willing, that optimism is better than pessimism, and that the question of the mortgage debt must be left to our wise government. And so long as the government is wise, everything must be left to it. What matters is not that the government actually do anything, but that it be said in the Chamber of Deputies that it is a wise government, and that the Chamber of Deputies leave everything to it. For Sidqi Pasha's government was wise, and the Deputies believed in its wisdom, never once withdrawing their confidence in it, and never once bringing it down, in whole or in part, on any single day. But its wisdom flew away unexpectedly, and it fell while the Deputies were elsewhere; then the Deputies gathered afterward and it became clear to them that it had never, on any single day, been wise, nor an inspiration to optimism, nor deserving of confidence at any time, or in any of its actions. As for the present ministry, its wisdom, praise God, remains secure, and so we must leave to it the question of the public debt, the question of the mortgage debt, and the question of the Mixed Courts. And it is handling these questions exactly as Sidqi Pasha's ministry used to handle them — that is, it is doing nothing at all! But nonetheless it is wise, and the Deputies must trust it, and must be optimistic, and must be reassured, and must leave everything to it. And they have done so, and continue to do so; they have been reassured, and continue to be reassured, that the question of the Mixed Courts is a matter under negotiation on which it is unwise to speak, and that the question of the public debt is a matter under negotiation on which it is unwise to speak. As for the question of the mortgage debt, may its fate be like the fate of these two questions, God willing. And matters are bound to their proper times. The amusing thing is that the Prime Minister wished to confirm to the Deputies what is beyond doubt — that his ministry is wise and looks after the public interest — so one of them asked him about the declaration of the Minister

of Finance, who had been claiming to the people that he would accept nothing but paper currency, and that he would not negotiate on the matter. The Prime Minister did not wish to answer this question, but rather freed himself of it, and slipped away from the questioner entirely. And how could he answer this question, when doing so would have driven the Minister of Finance straight into resignation, and announced that fact to the Deputies in plain terms? For the Minister of Finance does not wish to negotiate on the question of the public debt, and yet

the ministry's delegate has arrived, or all but arrived, in Paris, and is preparing to negotiate on this very question which the Minister of Finance does not wish to negotiate on. And the Minister of Finance accepts this state of affairs for himself, and does not resign — but on condition that it not be openly declared in the Chamber of Deputies, and that the Prime Minister not state it in terms the people can hear and the newspapers can broadcast. For the truth is bitter, even when it issues from the Prime Minister himself.

As for the Egyptian people, no one has asked them, and no one will ask them, whether they are optimistic or pessimistic, whether they are reassured by the wise government or not reassured. No one will ask them, because no one troubles himself to ask them; and so long as the Deputies and the Senators are content, the people are content, God willing. And we do not believe the people, even if they declare, and insist on declaring, that they are discontented — for that is merely talk, talk to which sensible men ought not to listen: men upon whom God has bestowed wisdom, competence, and skill, until such time as authority is stripped from them, and they come to the same failure and disgrace that overtook Sidqi Pasha.

Now then — do the Deputies and the Ministers wish to hear, once more, a single bitter word from among these bitter words they hear, grow angry at, and are then reassured by? If so, let them know that optimism is better than pessimism, as their colleague told them yesterday, and that the whole of the good lies in not disputing, not debating, and not burdening the government with the trouble of reply and response — for the wise man ought not to waste his time and effort to no purpose. And so long as the government is wise, and so long as the matter always ends in belief in its wisdom and trust in it in all things, then perhaps the prudent course is to grant it complete and total authority to conduct affairs without question or answer, in this exhausting, oppressive summer!!

[Taha Hussein]

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